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**Keyboard Warriors:**  
**Messaging, Mobilisation and the UK Radical Right in**  
**the Social Media Age**

**by**  
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## Abstract

“Technology is stuff that doesn’t work yet.”  
- *Bran Ferren*

This study aims to critique current, dominant conceptualisations of social media through case studies of two UK radical right groups, UKIP and Britain First. The current debate has been dominated by techno-deterministic analysis, which asserts that social media has had monocausal, universalistic effects on politics and society; these can be either positive (for techno-optimists) or negative (for techno-pessimists). Instead, this study advocates a critical approach described by scholars such as Christian Fuchs, which understands social media and technology as existing within a dialectical relationship with society.

This study represents an empirical contribution to the critical approach. It compares how each group used social media to achieve various political aims. It takes a chronological approach to map both technological and social dimensions onto studies of both groups. Study into these groups demonstrates the limitations of techno-determinism, as the success they enjoyed refutes the conclusions of both techno-optimist and techno-pessimist literature.

From this theoretical foundation, this thesis has undertaken quantitative and qualitative research into both groups. This study found that Britain First consistently made use of multimedia such as images, videos and shared links. This allowed them to ‘game’ Facebook’s algorithms to maximise exposure. They also experimented with new functionality often. In terms of content, BF often presented propaganda as memes to optimise visual messages for a social media audience. This allowed them to generate a mass online following and significant streams of finance, if not much tangible, real-world support.

This study also found that UKIP, by contrast, were not as dependent on social media for financial support or media exposure. Indeed, as media exposure increased, their use of social media similarly decreased. Moreover, the group’s political messages were more limited, dominated by several major policy agendas, such as Euroscepticism, critique of the establishment and anti-immigrant culture-based prejudice. Finally, in terms of messages, UKIP preferred a professional style of content creation to the memes of Britain First, recycling billboards and using more photographs and data visualisation.

**Word Count:** 79,990

## Introduction

Though social media has existed in its current form for more than fifteen years, it remains a subject of interest to academics, politicians and political commentators. Increased availability of smartphones, cheapness of data and global internet penetration has meant that social media use has grown continuously, with more people spending more time on these platforms every year. This is compounded by shifts in consumption habits; in almost every country, algorithmically selected news articles are now preferred to editorial selections (Newman *et al.*, 2016: 111-2).

Social media is also penetrating every level of politics. Political parties, campaigns, lobbyists, commentators, consultancies and even political institutions themselves are dedicating more resources to social media. Granular targeting through paid promotion has emerged as a novel political tool, complementing traditional campaigning. Meanwhile, social media companies are facing scrutiny, with parliamentary inquiries examining algorithms, screen use and fake news. Indeed, from 2018 representatives from nine parliaments across the world came together to form an International Grand Committee on Disinformation to discuss the unaccountable spread of digital propaganda.

### UKIP and Britain First

As social media has become prevalent, many groups have found success using it. 2014 saw the arrival of one such group, the UK Independence Party, as a key political player after more than 20 years on the fringes. In 1994, the party's first European elections, UKIP managed

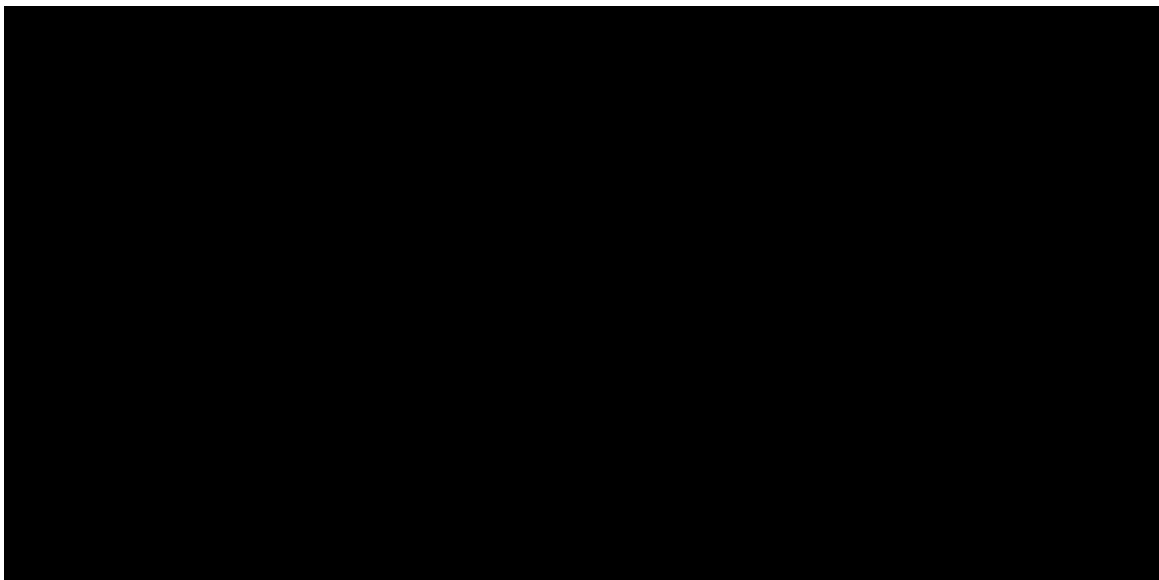
a paltry one percent of the vote, which increased to 16.5 by 2009 (Wintour and Watt, 2014). By the 2014 European elections, this almost doubled to 27.5 percent and marked the first time in 104 years that Labour or the Conservatives had not won a national election (Wintour and Watt, 2014). This mirrored similar results across Europe, as non-mainstream radical right and left parties made gains, including France's Front National, Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos (BBC, 2014; Burgen, 2015). UKIP also achieved its first representation in the House of Commons following the defections of Conservative MPs Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless (Bennett, 2015). In his victory address, Reckless stated that "Ukip would 'give you back your country'" (Watt and Mason, 2014). "All bets are off," party leader Nigel Farage declared shortly after, when asked about the upcoming general election; "the whole thing's up in the air" (Ashcroft, 2014). Media attention obsessed over UKIP's 2015 general election prospects. Though only Carswell was returned as an MP, UKIP achieved over 3.8 million votes at the general election, temporarily replacing the Lib Dems as the third largest party nationally. Undoubtedly, this influenced Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on EU membership in 2016.

Though academic literature has focused primarily on various macro-political factors that have influenced UKIP's emergence and generated its support, relatively little attention has been given to the messages and mediums through which its policy agenda has been disseminated (Reed, 2016). Media commentators and party leaders have often cited social media as a key part of campaigning. Reports from Impact Social and We Are Social found that UKIP was the most talked about political party on social media in the run-up to the 2014 European and 2015 general elections (McCarthy, 2015). In 2015, Farage observed that the party had ditched the "retired old colonels" for under-30s, asserting that "the pickup in vote has been due to our success on social media" (Joseph, 2015). In another instance, Farage posted



to UKIP's Facebook that "if it wasn't for the internet we wouldn't be here. YouTube and Facebook and all of this has helped us to reach an audience we would not have reached."

Between 2014 and 2016, the Britain First group was one of the fastest-growing extremist movements in the UK. Presenting itself as leading the "British Fightback" and declaring its page a "politically incorrect area", BF reached tens of millions with its propaganda per week, far outstripping not just the British National Party and English Defence League but every other UK party. This led to unprecedented levels of exposure, funding and media attention beyond what it would have achieved otherwise. Helen Margetts has noted that future radical right success in Britain may be buttressed by more extreme movements operating on the political periphery, for which BF has undoubtedly provided the blueprint (2016). Whilst BF never converted this following into electoral success, the effects of millions of people being exposed to extreme nationalist, anti-establishment and nativist discourse nor the impact for UK minorities should not be disregarded.



(Figs. i.1 and i.2): examples of nativist Britain First propaganda

## **Techno-determinism and social media**

Any examination of social media, however, must consider theoretical tensions within the social media debate. The predominant narratives that pervade popular discourses on social media have consistently emphasised that new media technologies have inherently and irrevocably conditioned social change and transformed human society. Despite extensive contributions in both public and academic spaces over the societal, political and economic impacts of social media for the last ten years, there has been no consensus on the extent or, increasingly, nature of what these outcomes might be (Casteltrione, 2015). As Deen Freelon notes, consistent with “the Internet’s inherent epistemological inclusiveness”, the social media debate has not distinguished between the contributions of its protagonists, whether they originate from academic, media or public contexts (2011a).

Traditionally, the debate has been separated into two contradistinctive sides: techno-optimists, who posit that social media has an inherently positive value on politics and society, and techno-pessimists, who assert the opposite (Freelon, 2011; Rosen, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Kadivar, 2015). Techno-optimists, for example, have emphasised that the Arab Spring and Occupy movements were enabled in some way by social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Techno-pessimists, meanwhile, have asserted that social media has undermined real-world activism and entrenched state and corporate hegemonies.

Whilst differing superficially, both are two facets of a reductionist ontology called technological determinism. Technological determinism is “the idea that technology develops as the sole result of an internal dynamic and then, unmediated by any other influence, moulds society to fit its pattern” (Winner, 1986c: 162; see also Fuchs, 2014: 201-2). Techno-determinism oversimplifies and constrains the existing debate within parameters that assume, one way or another, that technology will drive socioeconomic and political change. Both

positions essentialise social media by suggesting mono-causal outcomes and conflate novel features and functions with novel effects.

## **A critical approach**

This thesis instead advocates taking a critical, dialectical approach to social media and politics. This approach is described in detail by scholars such as Christian Fuchs, Marisol Sandoval and Thomas Allmer and has been inspired by the writings of Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse and critical theorists such as Andrew Feenberg (Allmer, 2014). The dialectical approach asserts that society and technology are mutually shaping. As Allmer states, “[s]ociety constructs and shapes technology (design) on the one hand and technology impacts and transforms society (assessment) on the other” (2014: 42). Dialectical analysis of social media focuses on its role in social struggles, asymmetric power relations, domination, exploitation and resource control (Fuchs, 2015; Allmer, 2014). As Fuchs states, “[i]t is time to discard [uncritical] approaches” that have dominated the field thus far (2015).

Just as the state and traditional media are considered fields of power struggles and relations, so too is social media (Allmer, 2014; Fuchs, 2016b). Power is exerted through them, but there is always the potential for counter-power resistance and counteraction. This has economic, political and cultural dimensions, pertaining to asymmetric control over ownership structures, decision-making and generation of reputation and popularity respectively (Fuchs, 2013; 2016b). For political social media campaigners, who do not own these platforms or might be excluded from decision-making about them, cultural power (mediated by social and/or technological contexts) is the most relevant dimension. As such, they compete or collaborate for reputation or popularity to convey ideology in social media spaces.

The critical approach has several advantages. First, it avoids determinisms that have characterised the popular debate on politics and social media (Chapters 1 and 2). The critical approach instead situates social media within the structural contexts of society from which it has originated. Second, it considers how social platforms can be used to advance regressive, radical right politics, unlike techno-deterministic conceptualisations of social media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Finally, it provides a consistent epistemological, methodological and praxiological approach for an integrative analysis in understanding social media and society (Chapter 3).

## **Research contribution and scope**

This thesis is an empirical contribution to existing literature in support of the critical approach. It provides a comprehensive overview of the social media strategies of two radical right groups, Britain First and UKIP, from 2010 to the end of 2016, taking into consideration both social contexts and algorithmic constraints. These groups and this timeframe were chosen as a focus for research due to the absolute success both groups achieved on social media despite their comparative lack of consistent election results. Both groups continually outstripped mainstream and radical left parties in terms of followers and engagements, which was often reiterated in the mainstream mass media (see Perraudin, 2014; Riddell, 2014; Rothwell, 2015; Wilkinson, 2015; Ball, 2017; Wendling, 2017). This exposure was most notable in 2014, when BF gained increasing publicity for its direct action and ‘honey-trap’<sup>1</sup> memes (Blewett, 2014)

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<sup>1</sup> Posts on innocuous, populist topics, such as animal cruelty, the royal family, Remembrance Day and deaths of famous people, that encourage people to share and like the page, which subsequently exposes the person to more radical content later on. Examples include “please share if you respect the poppy” or “share if you believe in ending animal cruelty”.

and UKIP achieved their unprecedented European election result and culminated in 2016 with the UK EU Referendum and London mayoral election.

This thesis provides the most in-depth examination of the social media strategies, ideologies and rhetoric of BF and UKIP to date. It used bespoke Python code written specifically for this purpose to collect, categorise and archive tens of thousands of pieces of social media data and metadata. It rejects a techno-determinist analysis of these groups' success but examines both technological aspects (such as platform architecture, algorithms and message mediums) and social/political factors (including shifting public attitudes, seminal events and election opportunities). By taking a chronological view, unlike other studies, it also considers how these groups adapted or reacted to shifting attitudes, changing algorithms and trigger moments throughout the period without giving predominance to either technological or social explanations.

As Thomas Allmer notes, there have been relatively few critical empirical studies of social media, and those that do focus mainly on privacy or surveillance (2014). Instead, this thesis sits alongside critical analysis by Christian Fuchs into public Facebook comments on the pages of far-right Freedom Party of Austria politicians Norbert Hofer and Heinz-Christian Strache (2016) and the Twitter messaging of radical right US President Donald Trump (2018). Through these studies, Fuchs has aimed to address questions about how the radical right communicates and why these communication strategies appear to be so successful, particularly when compared to left-wing counterparts (2018: 780). However, these studies have been limited in scope, concentrating on particular aspects of ideology or short timeframes.

#### **- Research questions**

The overarching research question for this thesis was: why were radical right groups such as Britain First and UKIP successful at using social media between 2010 and 2016, and what were the outcomes of this, given that this did not translate into consistent electoral success? The research shall focus on Facebook, YouTube and other video hosting platforms. Facebook in particular was chosen as it was the most popular platform for both the public, UKIP and BF alike, whilst video hosting platforms provided a comparative, complementary look at secondary social media platforms. Twitter was not examined due to practical limits of time and space within the thesis itself.

The first aspect of the research question focuses on specific characteristics of both groups' social media output. By examining social media strategies, platforms, mediums, ideology, campaigns and rhetoric, this thesis considers how both groups used social media and the insights that could be gleaned into each group's aims at any given moment. It also considered how each group responded to or was influenced by stimuli outside their control, such as changes to algorithmic arrangements or social triggers like election campaigns or significant political events. As such, time was an important factor in illustrating these changes. Moreover, given that both groups have been described as "winning" on social media or "showing other parties how Facebook engagement is done" (Riddell, 2014; Perraudin, 2014), research considered the similarities (or indeed differences) in their strategies and rhetoric, and whether radical right ideology either supported this success or potentially hindered it.

The second aspect examined outcomes. This is caveated by the recognition that causality between social media and outcomes are either tenuous, multifaceted, or complemented or contradicted by other factors. However, some insights may reasonably be gleaned from engagement data and other metrics or proxy variables and shall be discussed accordingly. For example, the aim was to examine whether outcomes matched party aims, such as regarding fundraising or mobilisation, by using data from the Electoral Commission or

otherwise outright stated in party content. The research also again interrogated time as a factor, questioning whether outcomes shifted over time or influenced future strategic directions.

The thesis utilised a mixed-methods research approach. On the one hand, quantitative research provided an overview of the quantity of output posted, ideologies promoted, and mediums utilised by both groups. This, when examined chronologically, allowed for a mapping of significant social events and algorithmic changes over content decisions. On the other hand, qualitative research provided “a deep critical analysis of meanings” (Fuchs, 2018: 786; see also Fuchs, 2019). It provided a look at exactly how ideology was communicated in a way that was not captured by the quantitative aspects of the thesis.

#### **- Hypotheses**

In terms of overarching expectations, it was hypothesised that both Britain First and UKIP used social media extensively and for a variety of reasons. Moreover, it was hypothesised that both groups would respond to social media logics and algorithms that mediate social media platforms. Given the dominance of visual content on Facebook and YouTube, it was expected that the majority of content would either be conveyed or accompanied by some form of image, particularly provocative images that exploit community issues and grievances or seminal events, to build or reinforce narratives (see Bolt, 2012). These messages would primarily pertain to critical considerations in the generation of reputation and popularity (for example, with populist rhetoric, humour and memes) and dehumanisation or exclusion of political, national or cultural out-groups (for example, with nativist, nationalist or anti-establishment content). This was to be teased out through both the quantitative and qualitative research that would examine both mediums and messages used in breadth and depth.

It was also hypothesised that social media would have utility distinct from transmitting ideological content. Although social media did not cause electoral success, it was assumed that election campaigning and follower mobilisation was a significant part of both groups' social media strategy, and that calls to action would be framed around enticing people to either follow official pages or participate in campaigning or direct action. Similarly, social media would also provide other opportunities for group-building, such as for fundraising, disseminating group news or recruiting new members. Quantitatively reviewing both groups' use of different social media functionalities and by qualitatively examining calls to action in posts were considered to be two ways to measure this.

## - Findings

Despite both groups being characterised as social media winners, Britain First and UKIP used these platforms in very different ways from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. From the quantitative data, BF invested a significant amount of resources into social media (Chapter 5). This was understandable, given that their Facebook presence in particular was the main reason why the group featured in news articles, TV documentaries and web blogs over other groups such as the EDL and BNP. Throughout the time studied, their content increasingly hardened in terms of the amount of nativist and anti-establishment (and, during 2016, Eurosceptic) content it produced. The group enabled this success by responding to changes in Facebook algorithmic arrangements, such as by embracing image-based content, pivoting to video and experimenting with new functionality when necessary. They also used Facebook as a means of generating financial income and mobilising followers to direct action but were considerably more successful at the former.



By contrast, UKIP were less invested in Facebook both in general but particularly after 2014, even though they (initially) invested more resources into YouTube than Britain First (Chapter 6). Rather, Facebook was used as a gateway to share relevant news articles and promote party websites to followers, as over half of all posts were links to other sites of some form. Following their historic European elections result, the party's use of Facebook diminished significantly, despite the party appointing a Head of Online Engagement and achieving engagements orders of magnitude greater after the result compared to before. This was likely due to the contemporaneous increase in traditional media exposure, which the group prioritised.

From a qualitative perspective, Britain First created content that was optimised for social media use relative to UKIP (Chapter 7). Most strikingly, they consistently posted propaganda in the form of memes to emulate other internet content and framed messages as jokes to delegitimise opponents and acknowledge Facebook's use as primarily an entertainment platform. However, their rhetoric often relied on extreme or provocative imagery or text to encourage responses, particularly in their Islamophobic, culturally prejudiced or racially prejudiced content.

UKIP, on the other hand, often used much more professional content to reflect their ambitions to be considered as a viable electoral alternative to established political parties despite their anti-establishment message (Chapter 8). This often took the form of political posters or billboards, data visualisations and photographs. The party also used flags and other nationalist symbols to juxtapose in- and out-groups or illustrate meanings in their content. Like Britain First, their anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic and anti-establishment content similarly hardened over time despite the professional veneer, depicting immigrants as directly causing social issues such as overcrowding and job competition.

## Outline

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first section provides theoretical and methodological grounding and historical context to the case studies. Chapter 1 reviews techno-optimist and techno-pessimist concepts within social media literature. Consistent with the epistemological inclusivity of the social media debate, contributions from both techno-optimists and techno-pessimists include political pundits and commentators, journalists, and academics and researchers from a variety of fields. Chapter 2 discusses alternatives to techno-determinism, advocating a critical approach to understanding social media ahead of other, more common alternatives. Chapter 3 presents the mixed-method research approach and ethical considerations that were made. Finally, Chapter 4 briefly contextualises the two groups themselves within the British political landscape over the last 120 years to situate them within the political traditions of previous radical right groups and discuss the barriers these groups faced to mainstream success.

The second section focuses on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the case studies of Britain First and UKIP. Chapter 5 provides an overview of BF's digital strategy. In particular, it examines their innovative approach to maximise their reach and game Facebook's algorithmic arrangements. Chapter 6 provides the same insights for UKIP, focusing on how social media complemented and was subsequently replaced by traditional media. Chapter 7 examines BF's use of memes to ground ideological positions and how it framed its Islamophobic and culturally prejudiced content. Chapter 8 looks at UKIP's use of billboards and data visualisation and scrutinises its anti-immigration and anti-establishment rhetoric. The Conclusion then discusses future avenues for research and real-world implications of future radical right emergence.

# Chapter 1

## Technological Determinism

### Introduction

This chapter shall critically review the current debate on the political effects of social media. This chapter shall first provide context to the rise of social media following the 2000 ‘dot-com’ crash. This chapter shall then consider the ‘optimistic’ side of techno-deterministic discourses. Techno-optimistic arguments have been delineated into three broad strands: ‘communication’, ‘participation’ and ‘mobilisation’. Finally, this chapter shall examine the ‘pessimistic’ side of techno-determinist discourses. Techno-pessimist arguments include the ‘slacktivism’ critique of social media, a prominent counter-discourse to techno-optimistic mobilisation literature, and ‘reinforcement hypothesis’. Similar to the three techno-optimistic arguments, this review considers that reinforcement hypothesis delineated into ‘state power’ and ‘corporate power’ concepts.

### The social media debate

Brian Loader and Dan Mercea note that, historically, the rhetoric following the emergence of new technology typically oscillates from initial elation and eager anticipation to disappointment and finally to a measured enthusiasm (2011: 1). The same arguably applies to Web 2.0. Academics argue that the first surge of techno-optimistic literature to explicitly connect new media with similarly new social, political and economic potentials emerged following the 2000 recession caused by the collapse of the ‘dot-com’ bubble (Lovink, 2011: 4;

Fuchs, 2014: 32-3). As Lovink states, “[t]he subsequent focus on profiting from free user-generated content can therefore be seen as a direct response to the dot.com crash” (2011: 5). Christian Fuchs presupposes that the novelty of the internet and popular consideration for its economic and political potential was largely driven by financial players in the post-dot-com collapse landscape, where investors had to again be convinced to capitalise new internet start-ups. As the internet could no longer be presented as a virtual utopian alternative to real-world capitalistic structures, its promise was instead reframed as a potential site for formal public spaces for rational political deliberation, civic engagement and political participation (Wilhelm, 2000; Dahlgren, 2001: 74; Penney, 2015). The term ‘Web 2.0’ itself was coined by technologist and entrepreneur Tim O’Reilly to emphasise the emergence of and shift towards a progressive technology characterised by decentralisation, collective intelligence and culture of participation in production.

Given the emphasis of these supposedly progressive aspects of Web 2.0, techno-celebratory discourse began to obsess over the potential role of new media in many postmillennial social movements. The anti-globalisation movement was perhaps the first social movement that was considered a product of, or at least defined by, the emancipatory nature of new media (Gerbaudo, 2012: 6). *The Guardian*, for example, attributed the London Carnival Against Capital in 1999 entirely to the Web’s mobilising power. *Indymedia Belgium*’s Han Soete similarly considered the movement’s existence to have been facilitated by the internet’s easy and cheap exchange of information and creation of contacts on a global scale (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002: 487-8). Most significantly, even a Canadian Security Intelligence Service report at the time opined that “[t]he Internet will continue to play a large role in the success and failure of globalisation protests and demonstrations” (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002: 488).

Following the initial deterministic fanfare, contemporary scholars did not similarly universally contribute to the techno-euphoria in academic literature (Dahlgren, 2001: 73-4).

Political science concerning the emergence of new media across the millennium was in fact “quite subtle about [Web 2.0’s] impact” on democracy in either a positive or negative way (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002: 465). Despite this, there was a growing sentiment that the internet might instead contribute to new, non-state citizen-based groups. Again, drawing on the experience of the anti-globalisation movement case, academics such as Bimber, Stanley, Weare, Van Aelst and Walgrave argued that lowering costs of and obstacles to collective action would inherently support groups operating outside mainstream political institutions without traditional systems of support and funding rather than established political parties and labour movements (Coleman, 2001; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002: 466; Stanley and Weare, 2004).

Techno-euphoric discourse was reinvigorated, however, by the development of social media platforms and social networking sites (SNSs) as an extension of new media during the mid-2000s. Whilst many early commercial social media platforms would eventually wane drastically (such as Myspace, launched in 2003) or die off entirely (such as Bebo, launched in 2005), by the end of the decade many more would go on to become globally-prominent sites, including LinkedIn (launched 2003), Facebook (2004), Reddit (2005), Twitter (2006) and Tumblr (2007). The most popular of these provoked much of the second-wave celebratory sentiment as they formed the first truly transnational networks of mass personal communication, underpinned by the increasing penetration of internet technologies connecting over two billion people across the globe by 2010 (Lutz and du Toit, 2014: 93).

### **The techno-optimist argument**

The three aspects of the techno-optimist argument – communication, participation and mobilisation hypotheses – originate in the observations of Peter Dahlgren (2001) and Stephen

Coleman (2001). Coleman presumed that the informative, deliberative and representative aspects of new media would constitute three fundamental transformative effects on politics and citizenship (2001: 118-22). Similarly, Dahlgren, drawing on the hypotheses of Bonnie Fisher *et al.*, emphasised three of the (more positive) types of civic interaction on the Internet - communitarian, democratic mobilisation and like-minded exchange (Dahlgren, 2001: 76; see also Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1996: 14-5). These strands conceptualise increasingly techno-deterministic, radical transformative effect on society.

### **- Communication hypothesis**

The communication strand of techno-optimism refers to the perceived transformative effect of social media on interpersonal relations and communication of information. Communication hypothesis conceptualises social media as a medium that inherently facilitates quick, easy and cheap exchange of information both between actors and on behalf of actors to external stakeholders (Coleman, 2001; Bolt, 2012; Gurak, 2014). Whilst this is not a controversial claim, and indeed, a more nuanced, less essentialist examination would avoid deterministic arguments, techno-optimists consider this to be inherently for the benefit and emancipation of disempowered or disenfranchised elements of society. To illustrate, contemporary techno-euphoric metaphorical rhetoric of a report to the Rome meeting of the EU Information Society Forum in November 1999 described the “perfect information arena” created by ICTs as a recreation of “the *agora* of Ancient Greece, a meeting place where citizens could go to be fully informed” without the intermediation or interdiction of political elites (Coleman, 2001: 118).

Early literature described the role of social media in both vertical and horizontal exchanges of information in the formation, demarcation and empowerment of virtual publics

of non-state actors. For Coleman, for instance, the effect of new media on state and media elites through vertical information exchange has had three effects: accessible and transparent digitised data and institutions of government; gains in efficiency and organisation through e-portals and gateways to categorised caches of digital data; and a “much more liberal array of alternative data, interpretations and opinions” to challenge entrenched state, corporate and old media communications (2001: 119; see also Hill and Hughes, 1998). Conversely, horizontal exchange is facilitated by what Fisher *et al.* term like-minded exchange of information, whereby new media technologies allow members to ‘meet’, discuss, promote and reinforce common values with like-minded, non-proximate peers (1996: 14). Ostracising and ‘flaming’ oppositional users allows them to form cohesive groups with clear, demarcated boundaries (Dahlgren, 2001: 76).

Subsequent contributions have focused on vertical communication and information exchange between political and corporate elites and publics, with emphasis on the implications of relative power and counter-power dynamics. As Fuchs notes, as “communications and communications technologies become more ubiquitous” in life and society, the concerns for scholars now are “how power has been transformed in an information society and what communication power is” (2014: 70). For many scholars, the work of Manuel Castells is the most prominent conceptualisation of communication power (Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012: 20-1; Fuchs, 2014: 70-1; Tudoroiu, 2014; Kadivar, 2015: 174). Castells underpins his concept of social media and communication power by describing power as exercised through networks in four interrelated forms: networking, network, networked and network-making power. ‘Networking power’ refers to the power of actors within the network over those not included in the network; ‘network power’ is the power to coordinate the network through normative rules of inclusion; ‘networked power’ is the power of actors within the

network over other networked actors; and ‘network-making power’ is power to ‘program’ networks with the norms, values and interests of the ‘programmers’ (2011: 773).

Whilst Castells contributed a seminal work on power situated in new media technologies, the broader theorisation of social media as a site of power and counter-power is shared by several academics. Communication hypothesis can be situated within a post-realist paradigm of political thought, with emphasis on how ‘less powerful’ actors have been able to extract concessions from the ‘more powerful’ in asymmetric conflicts (Dartnell, 2006; Castells, 2009). Scholars who operationalise communication counter-power concepts uniformly consider non-state, non-mainstream and revolutionary groups to have benefitted from the advantages of social media relative to their access to other resources in comparison to powerful actors.

Specifically, social media provides otherwise disempowered groups an opportunity through alternate mediums to challenge the traditional hegemonic monopolies on the control of information exchange, allowing them to reframe events and construct their own narratives (Dartnell, 2006; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2009; Rawnsley, 2009; Giglio, 2011; Guak, 2014; Mukhongo, 2014; see also Freelon, 2011a). Castells elucidates an important concept of social media that he calls ‘mass self-communication’. This mode of communication comes from the interplay of the two key descriptive attributes. Mass self-communication is ‘mass communication’ because of its potential to reach a global audience, and is ‘interpersonal communication’ because the composition, audience and reception of content is self-generated, self-directed and self-selected (Castells, 2009). Together, “[w]hat is historically novel ... is the articulation of all forms of communication into a composite, interactive, digital hypertext” (2009: 55). Thus, mass self-communication presents a form of counter-power, allowing users to agitate against the interests of elite actors and service their own interests on an unprecedented scale. Bernard Stiegler argues that “social media are the spaces for the construction of a digital



singularity; a process that ... can lead to the growth of radical and creative alternatives” (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 182; see also Stiegler, 2008: 42-8) For example, the Internet allows subjects to challenge and dismantle corporate and government power and authority and shape the cultural foundations of society, despite corporations themselves enclosing and commodifying communications commons and leveraging access to online global communications infrastructures for user data extraction and advertising space (Castells, 2009: 413-421). However, whilst Castells acknowledges that social media is not unmitigatedly favourable to ‘the people’, his argument remains a techno-optimistic one. As he states, “the more corporations invest in expanding communications networks (benefitting from a hefty return), the more people build their own networks mass self-communication, thus empowering themselves” (2009: 422).

If communication hypothesis predicates the amplification of counter-power communication potentials, it also proclaims an expansion in demand for this output. As well as facilitating the production of alternate discourses, frames and information channels, proponents of communication hypothesis also argue that new media technologies simultaneously broaden the scope that these messages can reach by ‘de-territorialising’ communication and reaching across non-physical (cultural, political, linguistic) barriers (Bennett, 2004; Alzouma, 2009; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2009; Mukhongo, 2014). Gary Rawnsley and Theodor Tudoroiu, for instance, argue that the readily available information infrastructure of computer technologies, particularly ‘on the go’ such as with laptops, smart phones and tablets, and self-organising groups of users (through chatrooms, forums and social media) mean that multimedia messages reach likeminded yet physically disparate people with ease otherwise impossible for traditional media (Rawnsley, 2009; Tudoroiu, 2014). Beyond circumnavigated geographical boundaries, any single message “will now be received by multiple national and cultural audiences” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2009: 41). Furthermore,

for communication hypothesisers, these diverging messages become increasingly difficult for elites to control as individuals can shift between different frames, particularly those interacting with non-mainstream media, which may converge with other non-mainstream perspectives.

Deen Freelon refers to this typology as the ‘citizen journalism platform’, observing that techno-optimist discourses emphasise the utility of social media as empowering citizens to break news of political upheaval locally and internationally, complementing traditional news and subverting state control of information (2011a). However, the claims of communication hypothesis extend further than basic citizen journalism and state/non-state struggles for empowerment. Academic contributors such as Neville Bolt, Andrew Hoskins, Ben O’Loughlin, Nahed Eltantawy, Julie B. Wiest, and Dorothy Kidd, for example, all argue that groups can use new media to disseminate political communications, or reframe state-originating communications, by bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and raise awareness for their ongoing causes that would be downplayed or overlooked within the mainstream media agenda (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2009; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011: 1212-3; Bolt, 2012: 79; Kidd, 2014: 233).

Furthermore, where the literature focuses on movements and interest groups characterised by social media, their ideology also conceptualised as progressive, emancipatory and/or left-leaning. Michael Y. Dartnell, for instance, comprehensively describes two case studies of progressive social media movements (2006). In Peru, the socialist and antiauthoritarian Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru movement employed new media technologies as a ‘media relay’ to disseminate its own messages to a global audience, which undermined government efforts to control the conflict (Dartnell, 2006). In Afghanistan, the feminist Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan marshalled its own multimedia capabilities to provide an exposé (what Dartnell calls ‘global witnessing’) on the oppression of women under the Taliban regime as well as a moral condemnation of the ISAF

occupation. Moreover, Yomi Kazeem asserts that grassroots social media witnessing projects at local ballot counts prevented the incumbent Nigerian government from committing electoral fraud and oversaw both the “freest and fairest modern political election in Nigeria” and the first ever Nigerian democratic transition of power (2017). Similarly, Samir Patel contends that a combination of disillusionment with traditional media outlets as fair informational platforms combined with social media functionality allowed the UK Labour Party and anti-fascist advocacy group HOPE Not Hate to run targeted ad campaigns to spread election materials in marginal constituencies and constituencies targeted by UKIP in 2017 UK general election that resulted in a hung parliament and a national reduction in UKIP’s vote share (Patel, 2017). As such, relatively few techno-optimist studies focus on non-progressive or non-left movements.

Several communication hypothesis advocates have emphasised the unique role and impact of images in political social media communication (Egerton, 2009; Bolt, 2012; Mukhongo, 2014). Images allow actors to transmit and legitimise narratives, and are engaged with in decontextualised, incongruent and unanalysed ways distinct from written or spoken arguments. Given the saturated nature of content on social media, it also facilitates a move towards an increasingly image-based medium due to the increasingly scarce ‘attention economy’ (Talking Politics, 2017). Lusike Mukhongo asserts that “[v]isuals make messages more informative and allow Internet users to convey concise descriptions of the political landscape of a nation” and notes the capacity of Twitter and Facebook to post images directly or indirectly, in groups or as comments to other posts (2014: 329-30). Similarly, Frazer Egerton contends that “images are the prime currency” of the Internet and allow individuals to “vicariously experience what they never had directly, and to reimagine themselves as an integral part of that supposed battle” (2009: 123). For Neville Bolt, social media instantaneously multiplies and amplifies the potency of visual messages to form a fundamental part of the symbolic power of insurgencies online. Thus, the contemporary insurgent can

directly and remotely redefine, reconstruct and redeploy dramatic visualisations of underlying grievance narratives to overlay their own values and garner support (2012: 2-3). Applying these observations, Mukhongo attests that esoteric visual symbolism in critiques of the state has allowed young activists in Kenya to subvert state surveillance (2014). Sara Salem, meanwhile, argues that widely disseminated images and videos of Khaled Said spread through social media facilitated the spread of the 2011 Egyptian popular protests (2015: 180).

### **- Participation hypothesis**

The participation strand of the techno-optimist argument refers to the transformative effect of social media in creating what advocates refer to as a ‘participatory culture’. The technological determinism of participatory culture rests on what techno-optimists conceptualise as a culture of ‘produsage’, whereby users of social media act as both consumers and producers. This emergent culture theoretically represents a change in how people view and interact with democratic institutions and agitate for more direct involvement in the process. This is underpinned by the propositions of communication hypothesis. If information and opinions can be shared quickly, easily and cheaply, and social media confers a relative advantage to the disempowered, then it would follow that a polity could then agitate for and easily operationalise increased participation in political processes.

Returning to the predictions of early techno-optimists, many scholars emphasised the evolutionary effects of social media on democracy and citizenship. Dahlgren argued that new media would facilitate communitarian civic interaction (2001: 76), whilst Fisher *et al.* assert that the communitarian “approximates an ideal type of direct participatory democracy that emphasizes mutuality”, such as when users share equal responsibilities to transmit and receive, store and access data (1996: 14). This sentiment is echoed by Coleman, who suggested that the

future of new media was to act as a ‘fifth estate’ to scrutinise and engage with local and national government (2001). Coleman referred to the examples of the online contributions and shared evidence given to debates, consultations and inquiries held by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, House of Commons Public Administration Committee and All-Party Domestic Violence Group (2001: 121).

From these early ruminations, two spheres of participation literature appear. The first sphere of participation literature presents a distinctly more abstract, culturally-focused and cyber-utopian concept of participation: namely, of produsage and participatory culture, which build upon and drastically extend the characteristic of mutuality that Fisher *et al* assert. Henry Jenkins was one of the first proponents to expand upon the participatory culture concept; just as Castells produced the seminal work on the power of new media communication Jenkins is referenced in debates as the progenitor of participation and produsage literature. Jenkins’ concept departs from the early reflections of Coleman, Dahlgren and Fisher *et al.* by focusing on the emergence of participatory culture within the digital political economy rather than its direct applicability to participatory democratic institutions. Jenkins *et al.* argue that new social media networks implicitly create a reciprocal relationship for producers and consumers. Consumers are empowered through their importance to development and distribution processes, whilst producers enjoy long-run benefits of broader brand exposure and deeper brand loyalty facilitated by intensifying consumer emotional attachment to the product through their participation in its spread through social media (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green, 2009).

This user-led content creation is what Axel Bruns refers to as ‘produsage’, a portmanteau itself metaphorically representing the “new hybrid form of simultaneous production and usage” he describes (2007). Produsage occurs through a culture and structure of open participation facilitated by social media, whereby numerous different users collaborate to create content, which is then further developed by other active, collective, voluntary

contributors within the community as content expands (Bruns, 2008). For techno-optimists, social media here reconfigures leisure as a “shared global resource” resting on “new kinds of participation and sharing” (Shirky, 2011a: 27). Emphasising a horizontal network structure (which will reappear in mobilisation hypothesis), there is necessarily no clear, centralised leadership in sites of produsage, though meritocratic, community-selected, monitored administrators may emerge (2008). For Jenkins, produsage and open source participation occur because social media is an expression of participatory culture. Jenkins lists the characteristics of participatory culture: low barriers to expression and engagement; strong support networks for creating and sharing; sharing of knowledge and experiences; belief in the validity of members’ contributions; and a feeling of some degree of social connection with others (2014: 54). One intersection of the participatory potential of produsage and democratic political practices is through the “political potentials of fan communities” (Fuchs, 2014: 58) that “speak back to the networks and the producers” (Jenkins, 1992: 284). Jenkins, as well as academic Jennifer Terrell, have referred to the (perhaps specious) example of the ‘Harry Potter Alliance’, a group which attempts to use the popularity of the *Harry Potter* novels as a key cultural pressure point to draw awareness to political events and direct fan activism (Jenkins, 2014: 58; Terrell, 2014).

However, it does not follow that the creation of online fan communities necessarily translates into protest. Nor, more pertinently, does it follow that these communities would necessarily have an interest in engaging with politics. Fuchs argues that “[Jenkins] tends to idealise” and romanticise these potentials “and cannot explain why these communities should make fans more interested and active in politics” (2014: 58). The ‘fan culture as participatory culture model’ has also been criticised for the assumption that open participation will facilitate inherently progressive cultural communities. Whilst Jenkins often notes that fan communities will not necessarily be progressive, the examples he uses and the formulation of his argument,

with its focus on community involvement, implies that they typically are. Fuchs uses examples of Norwegian right-wing extremists and fascist football ‘ultras’ to illustrate the type of ‘fan cultures’ that Jenkins overlooks (2014: 59). For example, the Norwegian document.no website and Facebook group is an online community that draws anti-immigration and pro-cultural purity activists; Anders Behring Breivik, the Islamophobic gunman who perpetrated the killing of 77 people in July 2011, was an active member of the document.no community. More pertinently, a key part of the culture of the football discussion forum [www.ultras.ws](http://www.ultras.ws) is facilitating a space where members can spread anti-Semitic and racist jokes and chants to shout at opposing teams. Furthermore, Manuela Caiani and Rossella Borri’s study of the far right online found that Internet technologies “seemed deeply integrated with the strategy and identity of ...radical right-wing groups” across Europe and the USA (2014: 198). Finally, Panos Kompatsiaris and Yiannis Mylonas found that Facebook and YouTube were primary vehicles for Greek Nazi community and identity-building in opportunities of social depression and institutional delegitimation (2015: 126).

The second corpus represents social media as a continuation of the online public sphere concept envisaged by Coleman (Shirky, 2011b; Tufekci, 2011; Romero, 2014; Pătruț, 2014). Gerbaudo opines that this corpus began to form following the crises of traditional democratic institutional legitimacy and representation and hope for a new “horizontal system of decision making”, incorporating otherwise excluded or disenfranchised people and communities in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007 (Gerbaudo, 2015: 85). Freelon summarises this typology as asserting that Internet technologies facilitate the formation and continuation of weak-tie non-state publics (2011a). Clay Shirky and Zeynep Tufekci, for instance, both argue that access to an online political conversation and subsequent formation of non-state counter-publics is far more politically important, particularly as a foundation to counter-state and revolutionary action, than access to and dissemination of information (Shirky, 2011b; Tufekci,

2011). Similarly, Leocadia Díaz Romero opines that Internet and mobile technologies promote real-time vertical and horizontal communication and enhance civic engagement and deliberative democracy (2014: 26). Finally, Brian Krueger asserts that the internet may expand political activity to those traditionally disadvantaged in the resource-dependant landscape of offline participation (2002: 493). Thus, this second corpus presents a narrower, politically-focused conceptualisation of social media-enabled participation, whereby social media ameliorates democratic institutions from both a top-down and bottom-up perspective.

Indeed, several citizen-led websites have emerged that have attempted to educate prospective voters, facilitate political participation and check state power and opacity. In the run-up to the UK general election of 2015, several websites were developed by politically engaged, cyber-enabled citizens to challenge partisan politics (Fishwick, 2015). Vote Match, Vote for Policies and PositionDial, alongside the pre-existing international Political Compass website, all encouraged users to take quizzes on their respective websites to either match users with political parties or political ideologies that most represented their opinions of and weighting on various policies. Other sites have attempted to address political illiteracy by providing prospective voters with information that they might find difficult to find and collate or otherwise not having time or necessarily think to gather. The Democratic Dashboard provided voters with constituency data, including a full breakdown of the previous general, local and devolved and European election results, infographics of past party spending and donations, prospective constituency candidates (with relevant social media hyperlinks), forecasts and polling data, local demographics for age, ethnicity, country of origin, health, unemployment, social grade and housing relative to the nationwide averages, and constituency background, including indices for inequality, per vote campaign spending and voter power. Similarly, TheyWorkForYou, operated by the charity mySociety, allowed users to search for their constituency representative and aims to present data on MPs (including voting record



relative to their respective party line, appearances in Parliament, expenses and incomes, interests, offices and numerology), Lords (including voting record, appearances and numerology), debates, committees and written answers to parliamentary questions.

Finally, certain sites have attempted to use web technologies to unofficially streamline, ameliorate or provide emancipatory alternatives to democratic structures. WriteToThem and WhatDoTheyKnow, also run by mySociety, ease and streamline otherwise daunting processes by which ordinarily uninformed or disengaged UK citizens can contact their various local, regional (where appropriate), national and European representatives or make Freedom of Information requests respectively. Furthermore, the website VoteSwap allowed geographically non-proximate Labour and Green Party voters to remotely pledge to one another to vote for the other in the 2015 general election in constituencies where the other party had the better chance of beating the Conservatives or otherwise protest voting in non-marginal Labour or Green seats as a protest to the first-past-the-post system in the UK (Tidy, 2015). Beyond the formality of websites, one activist collated voting data from 2015 to provide a spreadsheet on what party to vote for to unseat Conservative or UKIP candidates in each constituency in the 2017 snap general election, which was subsequently shared through social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Whilst these websites undoubtedly demonstrate the civic utility of Internet technologies, the link between the development of these resources and social media specifically is tenuous beyond their viral spread through social networks. Moreover, the overall extent of the impact of these websites on politics and society is debatable without publicly available key performance indicators or analytics. Whilst VoteSwap claimed that 21,000 Labour and Green supporters had agreed to swap with one another, ultimately the Conservatives gained a majority in Parliament with (or even despite) a stable voter share relative to their 2010 performance (Ipsos MORI, 2015). Furthermore, whilst there was a modest bump in voter turnout across the

UK, polling data points to this as being driven by the localised spike of over 7% in Scottish turnout (Ipsos MORI, 2015; UK Political Info, 2015). Finally, despite the common logic that these online resources might be of most use to young people, there were slight decreases in voter turnout of 18 and 44-year-olds, though this may equally have been influenced by changes to the system of voter registration, which was thought to have disproportionately affected young people (Intergenerational Foundation, 2015; Ipsos MORI, 2015).

Undeniably, however, the Internet and social media has streamlined the work of House of Commons select committees. For example, for inquiries where public evidence is desirable or required, committees have found success in using web forums and surveys promoted through committee and House social media channels (such as the Work and Pension Committee's Universal Credit inquiry) or by encouraging submissions crowdsourced directly through social media (such as the Treasury Committee's #AskJoJohnson student loans inquiry). Though, ultimately, the scope of inquiries for and barriers to public engagement is ultimately decided by the committee members and staff, social media-enabled engagement has begun to influence political processes.

One social media-specific example would be the WikiLeaks organisation, a not-for-profit, non-commercial whistleblowing platform founded by Internet activist Julian Assange in 2006 and arguably the most globally prominent civic social media site in the new media age (Fuchs, 2014: 210; WikiLeaks, 2015). In 2010, WikiLeaks published hundreds of thousands of top-secret American documents and diplomatic cables about military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a video of members of the US air force killing civilians and journalists in Iraq (Bumiller, 2010; Fuchs, 2014: 211). However, WikiLeaks has since faced political, economic and cultural censorship from states, corporations and commercial media. As of 2018, it has been denounced by state officials on security grounds, had its server space, domain names, bank accounts and donations apparatuses disabled (what WikiLeaks itself refers to as

the ‘Banking Blockade’), found its software services on Apple smartphones and tablets cancelled, and was consistently framed in a negative manner and equated with the allegations against Assange by traditional news sources (Fuchs, 2014; WikiLeaks, 2015).

Ultimately, Fuchs considers Jenkins’ conception of participatory culture to be an overly-reductionist comprehension of an otherwise nuanced political phenomenon. In his rebuttal of produsage, he acknowledges that the concept of ‘participation’ already exists in academic literature and, distinct from Jenkins *et al.*’s culture studies conception, is grounded in what Fuchs terms ‘participatory democracy theory’ in political science. Participatory democracy theory is multifaceted, having political, political economy and cultural dimensions, whereas Jenkins’ use of the term implies only a cultural dimension. Instead, participatory democracy theory lists several characteristics for political participation, including: the expansion of grassroots democracy; maximisation of human capacity; participatory decision-making; participation as education of participation; with a material foundation in technological productivity; equal access to capital; and as a process impeded by extractive power and ideology. Even a brief comparison of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘participatory democracy theory’ indicates drastic conceptual differences. Whilst Jenkins largely describes what the participation of some actor in some process might resemble, participatory democracy theory elucidates exactly how participatory democracy might be expanded, either through increasing political literacy or grassroots activism, or underpinned by technological increases in productivity or individual-level capacity development.

#### **- Mobilisation hypothesis**

Mobilisation hypothesis refers to the transformative effect of social media on political protest. As with participation hypothesis, techno-optimistic mobilisation arguments are

underpinned by the propositions of communication hypothesis. Techno-optimists argue that social media facilitates and drives direct, revolutionary political action by allowing disparate elements to coordinate and gather more efficiently and effectively. Whilst participation hypothesis speculates that social media shall lead to increased democratic participation in virtual spaces, mobilisation literature conversely argues that new virtual infrastructures allow disparate activists to mobilise and participate in real, geographically local spaces.

Since the early Occupy movements, social media has been considered a tool for direct action unlike anything previously available to activists. Dahlgren was one early speculator on the mobilising capacity of new media, who asserted “cyberspace is used by activist interest groups to organise themselves” (2001: 76). Fisher *et al.*, considered virtual newsgroups, mailing lists and other organisation-building technologies to allow social movements to devise and develop ideology, strategy and tactics, discuss bargains and compromises, and diminish “the costs of traditional participation in adversarial politics” (1996: 14). Coleman argued that online technologies would transform how the body politic would be represented. Given online access to information regarding records, dialogue and activities of their representatives, he proposed that constituents would be able to exert greater direct influence over politicians through online community gatherings and “cyber-surgeries” (2001: 122-3).

As early as 2011, techno-optimists were heralding the revolutionary, emancipatory potentials of social media. These contributions have ranged from modest observations to unabashed deterministic rhetoric (Shirky, 2011b; Gurak, 2014; La Rosa, 2014; Mare, 2014; Romero, 2014). Amaro La Rosa, for instance, contends that “social media could activate social movements” over relatively-short timespans given certain socio-political and communicational preconditions, though with inconsistent impacts even given the same social media platform (La Rosa, 2014: 45). In this techno-celebratory discourse, it becomes apparent how mobilisation hypothesis is underpinned by communication and participation hypotheses. Scholars such as

Fisher and Boekkooi observed that social media “provides the means through which individuals can connect with like-minded people who are not geographically proximate”, and the capacity for real-time peer-to-peer many-to-many communication meant protest would now be “easier, faster and more universal” (2011). Building on participation hypothesis, Tufekci similarly argues that “social media can be the most threatening part of the Internet to an authoritarian regime through its capacity to create a public(ish) sphere” widely-integrated within the body politic with a broader social focus beyond solely the political (2011). Clay Shirky and others envisaged that, “[a]s the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action [and] help loosely coordinated publics demand change” (2011b, 29).

Given how integral communication and participation literature is to its conceptual underpinnings, mobilisation literature is also steeped in the techno-deterministic tradition. Social media is venerated by its capacity to empower non-state actors relative to traditionally-powerful actors, who are contrariwise unable to utilise this potential advantage, by generating protest movements, demonstrations and direct action against hegemonic structures. However, mobilisation hypothesis and the preceding concepts differ in the sense that, whilst all consider social media to have monocausal positive effects on society, these effects are revolutionary rather than evolutionary; whereas social media ameliorates traditional communicative and institutional forms, here it generates completely new methodologies of movement building and direct action.

Unlike communication and participation hypotheses, however, mobilisation hypothesis has to many techno-optimists been demonstrably (and often unequivocally) realised to some extent by the Arab Uprisings at the turn of the decade. Indeed, numerous individual movements

have come to be synecdochally branded by the different social media platforms they have been associated with, such as the Twitter revolution of Tunisia and the Facebook revolution of Iran and Egypt (Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Bruns *et al.*, 2014). Drawing on the functions of Facebook and Twitter as an example, some political commentators such as Jared Cohen and Paul Mason have emphasised the capacity of social media to formally formulate groups and fix dates for protest as novel innovations in mobilisation (Gerbaudo, 2012: 3). Others, such as political correspondent Peter Beaumont, despite deemphasising the influence of Twitter in Tunisia, have described the ease of which distribution of demonstration details and literature occurred through Facebook, Twitter and email and the display of handheld signs as an analogue equivalent when social networks went down (2011). Other activists disseminated safety information, offered guidance and shared best practice, both within movements across the Arab world and between them (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011: 1212-5; Theodor Tudoroiu, 2014). Simultaneously, videos and hyperlink-shorteners provide evidence to claims of grievance and instantaneous communication could afford movements flexibility to respond to current events in real-time (Gerbaudo, 2012; Mason, 2012: 75).

Contributors also often characterise social media movements as evanescent, amorphous, composed of numerous actors with a dispersed leadership, and with some aim for emancipation or social justice (Beckett, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Boler and Nitsou, 2014; Gurak, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2015). The first three represent the novelty of movements mobilised through social media; the fourth represents its supposed progressive and counter-power potentials. Notably, contributors have leant on colourful metaphors to emphasise social media-generated movements as dispersed. Paolo Gerbaudo notes that these movements have been referred to as a “body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari) or “swarms without hives” (Hardt and Negri) to emphasise the lack of homogeneous identity or central structure or location (2012: 26-7). Similarly, Charlie Beckett characterises these new movements as “connected around nodal

fishes who tended to resist conventional leadership roles ... [and] momentum ... animated by collective, marginal actions” (2011). For Beckett, this works to the strength of these organisations in a novel way: “[t]he diffuse, horizontal nature of these movements made them very difficult to break [as] ... [t]heir diversity and flexibility gave them an organic strength” (2011). Castells further conflates the horizontal and viral aspects of these movements with them also being highly self-reflective, committed to non-violence and often rarely programmatic beyond agitating for some equality, be it political, social or economic, instead emerging spontaneously following an emotional trigger (2012).

These characterisations are clearly drawn from the Arab Spring and Occupy movements. This is understandable: both movements occurred only a few years after the advent of the main social media platforms and both were high profile instances of civic disobedience in Western media. Furthermore, both movements had numerous similarities beyond the social media aspect. Both were committed to confrontational but non-violent protest occupations of public spaces, even in the wake of “the very worst actions of provocateurs” such as extreme state suppression and police brutality (Lutz and du Toit, 2014: 98). Similarly, both movements explicitly held equality as a core value and opposed exploitation, be it the expansion of political equality and opposition to political disenfranchisement by authoritarian regimes in the Arab case or against the social and economic inequality and exploitation (symbolically and synecdochally represented by Wall Street) in the Occupy case (Fuchs, 2014: 2-3; Lutz and du Toit, 2014: 98). Finally, both movements were characterised as following a comparable model to the ‘flash-mob’ social phenomenon of the early 2000s: ad-hoc, liquid social aggregates of rapid assembly, sudden dispersion and coordinated predominantly by the capacities of handheld devices and social media (Gerbaudo, 2012: 27).

These secondary characteristics inherently contrast social media movements against the state and its capacity to suppress them. Philip Seib highlights two oft-cited reasons in techno-

optimistic literature explaining why governments, particularly applied to Egypt and other authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that faced popular uprisings, were incapable of resisting the spread of protests. First, it has been argued that the majority of state elites and their staff were ignorant of social media's counter-power potentials (Seib, 2012: 128; Schipul and Keeney, 2011: 10). Seib contends, for example, that social media acts as a 'force multiplier', "[enhancing] the influence of a relatively small number of people, [and] enabling them to have the reach and organizational capability of a far greater number" (Seib, 2012:127-8). This was crippling for sluggish regimes already struggling to adjust to the emergence of Al Jazeera and other non-state news organisations. Second, once the potential impact of social media was understood, regimes were either too slow, clumsy or technologically-constrained to respond effectively. As Seib maintains, in Egypt and elsewhere, some regimes chose to pull the plug on Internet access entirely with disastrous consequences on their newly-integrated economies dependent on producing export-oriented telecoms and ICTs throughout the Middle East (Seib, 2012: 128; Karagiannopoulos, 2012).

### **The techno-pessimist argument**

Techno-pessimism, meanwhile, refers to techno-determinists who consider social media to have a monocausal net-negative effect on society. Despite attempts to frame techno-pessimism as 'techno-realism', techno-pessimists do not eschew the normative dimensions of the debate; rather, they reject the optimistic considerations of techno-celebratory discourse in favour of their own normative approach. Thus, techno-pessimism should not be seen as a direct response to techno-optimism (though aspects do conflict), but instead a competing concept within technological determinism. For techno-pessimists, social media reinforces traditional



power structures and entrenches existing political and economic elites. Like the threefold techno-optimist argument, the techno-pessimist argument can be drawn into two (interrelated and intertwined) strands. The first argues that social media encourages ‘slacktivism’, a portmanteau of ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’ (Morozov, 2009). The second argues that existing elites actively subvert and abuse social media to exploit citizens and reinforce their monopolies on power and production - what Stanley and Weare refer to as ‘reinforcement hypothesis’ (2004).

### **- Slacktivism**

Slacktivism is a concept whereby social media encourages would-be activists to express support for sociopolitical movements through Internet technologies at the expense of real-world action (Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2009; Penney, 2015). Evgeny Morozov, a prominent techno-pessimist, argues that the hyperbolic narratives surrounding new technologies lead people to believe that simply signing an online petition constitutes as a meaningful political act (2009). Referring to his native Belarus, he argues that “no angry tweets or text messages, no matter how eloquent, have been able to rekindle the democratic spirit of the masses, who, to a large extent, have drowned in a bottomless reservoir of spin and hedonism, created by a government that has read its Huxley” (2010). He argues that people become distracted from pursuing real-life activism and reflecting on the implications of inaction by the ‘bread and circuses’ of personal vindication and entertainment social media engenders (2010: xiii; see also Fuchs, 2014: 2).

Perhaps the most influential proponent of the slacktivism critique (and critique of mobilisation literature generally) is political commentator Malcolm Gladwell (Gerbaudo, 2012; Fuchs, 2014: 187-8). Writing just before the Arab Spring, Gladwell argued that high-

risk activism (i.e. political protest, demonstrations and civil rights movements) requires ‘strong [social] ties’ to function, whereas social media only facilitates the formation of ‘weak ties’ (2010). Platforms such as Twitter, he opines, allow users to ‘follow’ and ‘be followed’ by strangers; platforms such as Facebook, meanwhile, allow users to manage acquaintance networks. Gladwell criticises the “evangelists of social media” who “believe that a Facebook friend is the same as a real friend” (2010). For him, weak ties are compounded by social media’s inherent horizontalism, which, he argues, prevents consensus, long-term direction and strategic and tactical planning. Instead, a lack of clear leadership leads to breakdowns in cohesion and efficiency. As he notes in contrast to techno-optimists such as Shirky, “[c]ar companies sensibly use a network to organize their hundreds of suppliers, but not to design their cars” (2010).

Despite his influence on critical literature, Gladwell’s argument has been ridiculed by techno-optimists for failing to predict the role of social media in the Arab Uprisings (Rosen, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012: 8). His position was not strengthened by his rebuttal a year later, which did not directly address the criticisms but rather proselytised about the romanticism of the U.S. civil rights movement and the 1980s protests in East Germany to reassert his argument that revolutions did not “need Twitter” (Gladwell, 2011).

Despite the contentiousness of Gladwell’s observations, slacktivism remains a prominent criticism of social media. Critics of techno-optimism have often addressed mobilisation hypothesis’s key case studies. Salem, for instance, argues that the critical, primary role of word-of-mouth communication is often overlooked in favour of social media (2015: 179). Beyond the Arab Spring, one pertinent counter-example is the infamous *Kony 2012* movement (Bailyn, 2012; Jenkins, 2014: 71; Meikle, 2014). Beginning as a thirty-minute video uploaded on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 by American non-profit organisation Invisible Children, the film was viewed over 100 million times and generated over 5 million tweets within a week (Harsin,

2013: 265; Gould, 2014: 207; Meikle, 2014: 373). The aim of the video was to “make Kony famous” around the globe to raise awareness of LRA violence and use of child soldiers, put pressure on states to reaffirm their commitments to stopping Kony and to hold him accountable for his human rights abuses (Invisible Children, 2012). The campaign attracted several high-profile celebrity supporters and was backed by political elites such as US President Barack Obama and ICC Chief Prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo (Shahid, 2012; The Telegraph, 2012). Graham Meikle notes that “[i]f the only goal of *Kony 2012* had been to ‘make Kony famous’, it would have been judged a success” (2014: 379; see also Mengestu, 2012). However, in mobilising direct action, such as by encouraging participators to use campaign paraphernalia sold in its ‘Cover the Night’ action box, *Kony 2012* was a resounding failure (Harsin, 2014; Meikle, 2014). For critics, the inability to mobilise activists perfectly illustrated slacktivism: whilst supporters empathised with the campaign aims, desired to act, and acted in a way that was convenient for them, the issues and solutions presented to them were oversimplified and self-gratifying to the point of irrelevance (Bailyn, 2012; Mengestu, 2012). The overreliance on social media to provide momentum was finally undermined by the media attention surrounding Jason Russell, co-founder of Invisible Children and creator of the *Kony 2012* film, following his public breakdown in March at the height of the campaign’s publicity.

Despite drawing heavily on the Arab Spring, Occupy and other modern movements of protest, the validity of mobilisation literature has remained under question by academics and writers and slacktivism remains its most salient critique (Demirhan, 2014). Many critics tend to argue that techno-optimists assume that social media has the capacity to generate political protest *ex nihilo*, or that traditional media had a much greater impact, or even that social media activism might replace real-world activism (Coldewey, 2011; Kravets, 2011; Heaven, 2011; Penny, 2011). However, Jay Rosen argues that many critics of mobilisation hypothesis tend to cast nameless techno-optimists making maximalist claims as a sufficient and fair representation

of mobilisation hypothesis (2011). Shirky, for instance, asserts that, for mobilisation hypothesisers, social media can only coordinate, document and augment, not replace, real-world action. He responds to Morozov in particular by stressing that, just because “barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively” (2011b: 38). Similarly, Schipul and Keeney argue that new media had important roles to play in the Arab Spring and have emphasised how social media acted as a catalyst for protest rather than the spark (2011: 10).

That said, so-called techno-realists have called for critique without “derisive debunking” (Vargas, 2011; see also Doctorow, 2011; Rosen, 2011). Rosen laments that debunking only caricatures of cyber-utopian arguments – a typology he terms ‘Twitter Can’t Topple Dictators’ literature – skirts the question of how the Internet might actually affect the “balance of forces” (2011). Ulises Mejias is one such critic who offers a “hard” evaluation of mobilisation hypothesis. For Mejias, techno-celebratory discourse is “a form of self-focused empathy”, whereby the Western, technologically-savvy Self is reaffirmed by the depoliticisation and projection of the Self onto the (in this instance, ‘Orientalised’ Muslim) Other who are “using the same Web 2.0 products we are using” in their “desperate struggle for human dignity” (2011). The ‘social media revolution’ frame is a powerful operationalisation of symbolic power in the West that depoliticises, dehumanises and romanticises the actual, underlying ‘human revolution’. Aaron Bady takes Rosen’s argument even further: he considers that Gladwell’s arguments allow them to contribute to, and therefore “safely opine and claim authority over”, a debate that “has nothing to do with a century of accumulated thought, emotion, identity, and narrated experience ... which most Americans find strange and foreign” (2011).

### **- Reinforcement hypothesis**

Reinforcement hypothesis, on the other hand, contends that new media directly reinforces traditional elite power, be they political, corporate, economic or social elites. Reinforcement hypothesis stands distinct from slacktivism rather than building upon it as with three strands of techno-optimism. Thomas Poell summarises it by asserting that activists relying on commercial social media are vulnerable to political and corporate ‘steering’ by powerful actors (2015: 202). In their study of the 2012 Local Elections in Belgium, Evelein D’heer and Pieter Verdegem likewise concluded that the position of citizen users on Twitter did “not represent a shift in traditional power hierarchies and elite domination” (2014: 94). Morozov has written extensively on both state power and corporations and is often referenced as the exemplar of reinforcement hypothesis (Gerbaudo, 2012: 7; Joseph, 2012; Fuchs, 2014: 201; Kadivar, 2015: 174).

Techno-optimistic contributors emphasise attempts to control of social media by authoritarian regimes to underscore the emancipatory power of social media. By contrast, techno-pessimists argue that emancipatory potentials of social media cannot be actualised if regimes control platform access in the first place. When faced with growing dissent during the Arab Spring, contributors note that threatened authoritarian regimes denied citizens’ Internet access despite the risk such interference posed to their own emerging telecommunications and digital economies (Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Kadivar, 2015). In Iran, for instance, state actors disabled mobile texting and blocked access to political blogs through cyber-security suites, prosecution and threats (Karagiannopoulos, 2012: 156; Tusa, 2013; Kadivar, 2015: 176). In Egypt, the Mubarak regime intensified social media filtering and blocked certain blogs and phone networks before shutting down Internet access altogether for five days from January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (Tufekci, 2011; Joseph, 2012: 161; Karagiannopoulos, 2012: 160; Tusa, 2013). Moreover, authoritarian regimes in North Korea, China and Russia have all been criticised in

the West for enforcing internet blackouts, creating obstacles to prevent or exhaust efforts to access American social networking sites such as Facebook, diverting traffic to domestic equivalents and censoring content on these local SNSs (Kulesza, 2014; Morozov, 2015a). Significantly, these competing concepts have real-world impacts by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because technophilic narratives celebrate social media as emancipatory and pro-democracy, states clamp down on social media usage; as these states clamp down on social media, it is given as proof of social media's uses for democratisation.

Moreover, techno-pessimists emphasise that not only is social media not inherently emancipatory, but also facilitates state surveillance, profiling and anticipatory policing (Morozov, 2010; Fuchs, 2012a; Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Salter, 2014; Cable, 2015; Kadivar, 2015; Salem, 2015; Schneider, 2015; Trottier, 2015; see also Mukhongo, 2014). In Egypt, police tracked dissidents through social networks using Trojan software and jailed social media-based protest organisers (Dunn, 2011; Karagiannopoulos, 2012: 160; Salem, 2015). This repressive cyber-enabled policing only intensified after bloggers retaliated to the clampdown through global witnessing of police coercion, violence and torture (Salem, 2015: 177). In Iran, social media sites were infiltrated by pro-regime elements to spread misinformation and identify, monitor and target activists. The state also utilised sophisticated Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) surveillance software that monitored metadata (user data) as well as content (Joseph, 2012: 167; Karagiannopoulos, 2012: 156; Fuchs, 2013; Kadivar, 2015: 177). In late-2012, the Iranian government announced its intention to launch a heavily-censored 'Halal Internet' (Joseph, 2012: 171). Looking at the societal impact of DPI specifically, Fuchs argues that, within the post-9/11, Western neoliberal landscape's new security-industrial complex exporting communications surveillance software, modern states endeavour to build Foucauldian cyber-panopticons to correct complex social issues and fetishise technological potentials to this end (2013: 1352-3). He warns that as "technological determinism inscribes

power into technology, it reduces power to a technologically manageable phenomenon and thereby neglects the interaction of technology and society” (2013: 1353-4).

However, for techno-pessimists, looking beyond authoritarian regimes reveals the obtuseness of the techno-optimist position and supports the assertion that all states can and will attempt to control access to social media (Morozov, 2010; Morozov, 2015a). Helen Kennedy and Giles Moss argue that corporations and governments have an advantage of social media access relative to publics through best access to data mining and analytics tools. This leads to less privacy, more surveillance and social discrimination, and new ways of dominating publics (Kennedy and Moss, 2015: 5). Morozov highlights the contradictory and asymmetric nature of the West’s Internet freedom agenda: whilst Chinese censorship is framed as curbing democracy and inhibiting the actions of pro-democracy citizens, American crackdowns on Internet access, such as for minors, is framed as protective, parental and pre-emptive, safeguarding against offensive or explicit content, scams, grooming and paedophilia. As Morozov points out, “[i]t’s as if we can’t ever imagine that Chinese or Russian parents, too, might have some valid concerns about how their kids spend their free time” (2010: 114). He expands upon this by examining the American state’s own aggressive attempts to access content stored abroad – ostensibly in the name of security – and its ongoing diplomatic and legal struggles against other states (mostly nominal allies) and companies (often American) in its attempts to bypass bilateral treaties that would otherwise prevent access to foreign data (2015a). The US Justice Department also began a protracted fight with Apple in 2016 calling for “responsible encryption” that would allow them to access the messages of criminals (Roberts, 2017). In the UK, the Government had ongoing disputes with WhatsApp, a dark social messaging platform following the addition of end-to-end encryption to all its messages in Spring 2016. This prevented third-party access to message content, and the company began refusing to comply with information requests (Griffin, 2016). WhatsApp faced significant pushback from the

Government, most significantly following the Westminster attack in March 2017, when then-Home Secretary Amber Rudd called on the company to provide access to terrorist communications (Burrell, 2017; Cheshire, 2017; Merrick, 2016). In September 2017, it further emerged from an anonymous security source that the Government had tried to put pressure on the company to provide backdoor access to messages (Cheshire, 2017; Ong, 2017).

Undoubtedly the most significant actor in the public cyber surveillance debate, both as a contributor and as a subject, is Edward Snowden, former CIA employee and NSA contractor with Dell who leaked up to 1.7 million global government surveillance files to the press in 2013 (Scheuerman, 2014; Toxen, 2014: 44). However, despite Snowden's (and subsequent) leaks, there has been little effort to curtail government surveillance programs. Whilst the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York ruled that the NSA domestic telephone bulk data collection program was illegal in May 2015, for instance, it stopped short of forcing the NSA to halt the program and, following a temporary hiatus in June after the USA Freedom Act expired, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court ruled that the NSA could resume data collection (Vinton, 2015; Savage, 2015). Furthermore, a study by Sören Preibusch considered that, beyond encouraging a few new users to use anonymising proxies and privacy-enhancing technologies, public interest in Snowden himself and the moral debate surrounding his actions, the global surveillance leaks did little to change long-term privacy-protecting behaviours of many Western web users (Scheuerman, 2014; Preibusch, 2015).

Clay Shirky's response to reinforcement hypothesis argues that oppressive control and abuse of social media technologies is not necessarily costless. Whilst he acknowledges that "most of the world's authoritarian governments" and, "alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones" attempt to control or monitor social media usage and censor specific content, he argues that these attempts are unlikely to be a successful long-term solution to a strengthening civil society and public sphere (2011b: 30). This, he contends, is because of the



‘dictator’s dilemma’. The dictator’s dilemma asserts that a state reliant on or envisaging a monopoly on public discourse must either repress critics or produce propaganda but at “higher costs than simply not having any critics to silence or reply to in the first place”, or shut down Internet access completely and risk radicalising pro-regime or apathetic elements of society and harming the economy (2011b: 36; see also Tufekci, 2011). For Shirky, such control is untenable and authoritarian regimes are increasingly faced with the choice of allowing dissidents the space and freedom to criticise the regime or providing motives to challenge the regime outright.

Beyond expanding state capacity to exert hard power, many techno-pessimists also contend that social media is a site of pro-state soft power (Turnšek and Jankowski, 2008). Bucy and Gregson, for instance, argue that social media provide merely another mechanism of legitimisation for state power as governments normalise and subsume cyber-enabled engagement within traditional political structures and encourage the perception of responsiveness to the public that is never actualised (2001: 357). Others note that social media provides a direct link between politicians and their constituents, which allows them to control narratives, subvert analysis of experienced professional political journalists and commentators, and encourage lay publics without political knowledge to evaluate the quality of arguments for themselves (Stromer-Galley and Jamieson, 2001; Livingstone and Bober, 2004). Some techno-pessimists go further, applying the concept on an international scale. Sharon McLennan, for example, argues that social media reinforces Western-centric hegemonic power dynamics and hierarchies at the expense of marginalised cultures within global society (2016). Furthermore, many point out that it is wrong to assume that all non-state actors on social media supported progressive, democratic, emancipatory change. Morozov notes that bloggers both in authoritarian states such as Russia, China and Iran, as well as liberal Western democracies, might harbour views even more hard-line than their respective governments (Joseph, 2012:

173). Conversely, social media might be used by individuals for unsocial means, indirectly disrupting or crowding out progressive networks or otherwise provoking and legitimising government crackdowns, such as during the British riots of August 2011 or the Dutch ‘Project X Haren’ riot of September 2012 (Joseph, 2012: 174; van Dijck and Poell, 2013).

Several techno-pessimists have also emphasised that social media has entrenched the power of corporate and capitalist elites (Lovink, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2014; Poell, 2014; Poell, 2015). Rather than engage Internet users in a collaborative process, they argue that corporations instead exploit and commodify forms of produsage without transferring resulting financial gains to their producers (2014: 255). Fuchs describes the case of the *Huffington Post*, in which its founder, Arianna Huffington, effectively commodified unpaid contributions from voluntary bloggers when she sold the company to multinational mass media corporation AOL for \$315 million in 2011 (2014: 3-4). Despite Henry Jenkins’ claims that social media would create stronger connections between corporations and consumers, Fuchs contends that “[n]either the users nor the waged employees of Facebook, Google and others ... “participate” in economic decision-making, but are excluded from it” (2012: 56-7), whilst the monetary benefits coalesce upwards. Thus, where state power and corporate power techno-pessimism can be differentiated is by the perceived outcome of each elite’s attempts to dominate through social media technologies. In this regard, the interests of the state and corporate interests do not necessarily align. States attempt to extend political power by both controlling access to social media and utilising its mechanisms, whilst corporations, unable (or unwilling) to control access to and the spread of social media technologies instead utilise social media to commodify user data and other areas of the virtual commons (Fuchs, 2014; see also: Morozov, 2014b; 2015a; 2015c; 2015d).

Indeed, corporations that specialise in creating platforms for the ‘gig economy’, such as Uber, Uber Eats and Deliveroo, have been criticised for exploitative contracts even in highly

regulated Western labour markets whilst similarly undermining and outcompeting those pre-existing companies bound by those same regulations. Rather than empower workers and give them a deeper, produsage-style stake in their work, platforms have simply replicated and intensified existing corporate structures. Though many contributors emphasise the corporate aspects of reinforcement hypothesis, there is also a further dimension that examines the existing trends in access to resources and political participation. Brian Krueger, for instance, emphasises that some believe that internet technologies may reinforce the link between participation and nonparticipation and access to resources. He asserts that the resource approach to social media assumes that activities of engaged publics, such as donating money to political campaigns, investing time in political engagement, and having the civic skills to navigate political structures, all require the money, time and skills to do so in the first place (2002: 480). Thus, the engagement potentials may convey greater than equal benefits to the relatively resource-rich even between individuals with the same theoretical desire to act politically.

For some techno-pessimists, however, corporate exploitation and commodification of users go beyond co-opting the work of active participants. Rather, big tech corporations harvest data and sell them to advertisers and other corporations, commodifying users' "congealed social life" for profit (Lovink, 2011; Morozov, 2014a; 2014b; 2015c; 2015d). Poell, for instance, notes that social media platforms are ultimately fundamentally commercial operations, focused on generating revenue through user data, and whilst some cater to the use of activists to maximise user activity, they often conflict and contradict these uses (2015: 202). Lovink similarly states that "centralized internet services [are] offered to us at no cost in exchange for collecting our data, profiles, music tastes, social behaviours, and opinions" (2011: 31; see also 2013). Morozov adds that "everything Google does revolves around data collecting" and condemns Facebook's 'Internet.org' initiative as a way of charging the global

poor for connectivity and as a further source of data-mining (2014b; 2015d). Fenton and Barassi note that “[a]dvertisements on the Internet are frequently personalized, which is made possible by the surveillance of, storing of, and assessing of user activities and user data with the help of computers and databases”, which undermine the claims made by techno-optimists such as Castells (2011: 192). Beyond simply gathering data, Lovink also asserts that, as gateways, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have taken active roles in policing accounts and posts and censoring or deleting them without transparency for best practice or due process (2013).

## **Concluding remarks**

Though most contributions tend to fall within either the techno-optimist or techno-pessimist camp, it is not to say there are not alternatives to technological determinism. At the periphery of the debate, there are some contributors who reject both as techno-deterministic analysis. The next chapter shall discuss issues with techno-determinism and discuss several alternatives. A refutation of techno-determinism, however, necessarily begs the question: what framework of analysis can satisfactorily replace the salience of determinism within the social media debate? This question is not new, just as techno-determinism is not new within broader academic literature on technology, politics and society. The next chapter shall therefore also advocate the critical approach and how it pertains to this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Alternatives to Technological Determinism**

#### **Introduction**

The first section of this chapter shall critically evaluate techno-determinism. The second section shall describe the dialectic approach to social media and the relationship between technology and society advanced by scholars such as Christian Fuchs. This section shall also contrast the dialectic approach to techno-determinism specifically. The chapter shall review and reject other, popular frameworks that have also been presented as alternatives to techno-determinism beyond the social media debate. The alternatives that will be considered are techno-neutrality, social determinism and actor-network theory. Finally, this chapter shall take a critical approach to algorithms, which will underpin some of the analysis in Chapters 5-8.

#### **What is techno-determinism?**

Through the various strands of techno-optimist and techno-pessimist literature, technological determinism has dominated the social media debate. Because the most prominent contributors have coalesced on either side, there has been little examination of techno-determinism within the debate itself. Christian Fuchs is one prominent contemporary scholar who has consistently critiqued both sides, whilst academics such as Barrie Axford, Jim Macnamara and Ansgar Zerfass have strived to avoid techno-determinism in their analyses (Fuchs, 2011; 2014a; Axford, 2011; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). Breindl asserts that “[w]e

need to analyze critically the too often polarized oppositions – such as social isolation or global interconnectedness, informed versus apathetic citizens – that are used by internet scholars ... [and] make more explicit normative assumptions that underpin both practice and interpretation” (2010: 14). Critiques of techno-determinism are not new, and as such, alternatives to determinism in the social media debate can be found by looking to literature that pre-dates social media itself. Indeed, the term has been attributed to late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century scholar Thomas Veblen and has been a topic of academic debate since at least the 1950s.

Deterministic analysis has been described as universalist, reductionist and essentialist. Techno-determinism is universalist insofar as technology is evaluated as consistently precluding either a progressive or oppressive effect on society, regardless of context or form. Techno-deterministic universalism in the social media debate reflects the techno-optimist/pessimist binary, delineated precisely by contrasting perspectives on progressive and oppressive outcomes of social media. Whilst contributors often state that social media has both positive *and* negative effects, social media is often described in terms of net effects, with one side ‘over-determining’ the other (Fuchs, 2011). Such evaluation ignores the drastically different social, political, economic and historic contexts that technology might be situated in. That social media cannot be shoehorned into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ analysis is reflected by the numerous, often contradictory examples described in Chapter 1.

Universalism within techno-deterministic social media analysis is a function of the inherent reductionism of determinism. Even before the advent of social media, techno-centric discourse has emphasised the relationship between technology and society as one of cause and effect. Chandler attributes this as emulating “the ‘scientific’ explanation” of social phenomena, despite the difficulties in applying this approach to social science given the many variables and

nonlinear, multi-causal relations between them (1995). Fundamentally, its appeal is linked to the predictive potential that such a theory presents to determinists (Chandler, 1995).

Determinism is reductionist insofar as it describes the contexts surrounding and contrivances of technology in simplistic terms and evaluates technology by broad societal “effects”. The reductionism of technological determinism is often demonstrated by the ahistorical claims made by determinists. By reducing social media (and technology more broadly) to a monocausal function that simply acts on society, determinists ignore both the social processes embedded within the use of technology and the confluence of factors that contribute to societal change. When writing about historical shifts, technological determinists have often cited the sudden introduction of new technologies as the primary driver of social progress. However, Daniel Chandler argues that, *reductio ad absurdum*, commentators looking both to history and their own presents have consistently overstated technology’s effects on politics and society (1995). William Fielding Ogburn, a notable techno-determinist, once observed that “technology is considered a cause of social change is indicated by ... expressions (such as) ‘gunpowder destroyed feudalism’, (or) ‘rail-roads created cities’” (Ogburn, 1957, in Elliott and Elliott, 1976: 5). Overarching claims by determinists have ranged from reifying the horse collar or stirrup as the foundational basis of the modern world (McLuhan and Watson, 1970: 121) to forecasting the total transformative power of microelectronics (Large, 1980). Lynn White, for instance, has claimed that the stirrup produced feudalism; McLuhan has also claimed that the printing press birthed the nation state. This narrative is pervasive, nesting within both academic and popular discourse: the printing press, for example, is commonly attributed as causing the Reformation, navigational instruments causing European colonisation of America, and the automobile leading to suburbia (Marx and Smith, 1995: x). In populist vernacular, technological determinism most often leads to describing ‘periods’ of recent history as ‘the atomic age’, the ‘space age’ and ‘digital age’. These epithets are invariably Western-

centric, constructed similarly to how decades of the twentieth century are often culturally and politically demarcated as radically different to one other, giving the implication that society abruptly lurches forward every ten years rather than undergoing gradual change.

Finally, determinism is essentialist insofar as technology is conceptualised as having specific characteristics, particularly those associated with technological ‘artefacts’ (physical man-made objects, such as tools or machines). Rather, ‘technology’ itself refers to a variety of manmade techniques, methods and skills aggregated in either knowledge systems or in specific tools, each designed for idiosyncratic purposes. The term ‘technology’ can only be applied in the broadest sense, then, given that it can refer to any one particular contrivance of all tools, instruments and machines (with varying mundanity or complexity, from a simple spoon to a particle accelerator), methods, techniques, skills, processes, organisational forms and systems (of any type, origin or scale, from striking a fire to the production line), and systems of knowledge currently in existence (Chandler, 1995). As Seymour Melman succinctly states, “there is no machine in general” (1972: 59). Thus, techniques such as everyday cooking methods to artefacts like medical instruments and materials have incomparable effects in any one society, let alone consistently across all societies. Moreover, technological artefacts themselves cannot be generalised alongside other artefacts, given that objects as mundane as cigarettes are incomparable to biological and chemical weapons.

Essentialism is not unique to techno-determinism. Many societal factors are often reduced in the same way, referring to grand (but overly broad) concepts such as ‘religion’, ‘economics’, ‘politics’, ‘culture’ and ‘society’. In actuality, each represents a diverse range of distinct contrivances. Given the breadth of the term ‘technology’, no essential characteristics apply across all forms beyond being ‘manmade’ (and even then, animals often use rudimentary tools and systems, from the crude tools of other primates to the agricultural systems of woodcutter ants). This begs the question and indeed applies to the utility of the term ‘social



media’, given that it encompasses microblogging sites, social networking sites, user content sharing platforms and dark social, which often overlap across and within individual applications.

Expanding the definition of technology beyond artefacts to incorporate intangible technological forms blurs the techno-determinist delineation between technology and society. Bruce Bimber, in his examination of Marx and technological determinism, states that “[s]ince the claim of technological determinism ... is to be that the features of technology determine social change, ‘technology’ and ‘society’ should be kept functionally distinct” (1990: 341). However, these forms of technology are incontrovertibly embedded in society and reflect the social conditions in which they originate. Again, Bimber asserts that “factors such as knowledge and forms of social organization are important general and distinguishing features of societies themselves ... social change is dependent in part upon social and intellectual factors” (1990: 340-1). Subsequently, they undermine techno-determinist analysis that treat these two spheres as functionally discrete. As Gerbaudo postulates, “[i]n order to overcome the abstraction and essentialism underlying the contemporary debate ... we need to develop a situated analysis of social media practices paying attention to their interaction with other forms of communication and with the particular physical geography” (2012).

## **A Critical Approach**

Scholars such as Chandler and Winner have consistently criticised the reductionism and universalism of deterministic analysis in favour of a nuanced, holistic approach to understanding technology. Some analysis has offered utility in certain case studies, even if grand conclusions of techno-emancipatory social change do not. Both sides of the debate

present some valid examinations in cases such as the Arab Spring, even as conclusions diverge to make broad, mono-causal claims. By recognising the need to contextualise the use of new media technologies within a model that situates technology within a reciprocal relationship with society, the social media debate might then be able to progress beyond the broad claims of technological determinism.

### **- Influential contributions**

The work of Langdon Winner represents one significant examination of the relationship between technology, politics and society. Feenberg notes that Winner's initial contribution, that "artefacts have politics", was controversial, but has since become self-evident. Winner himself argues that technology naturally reflects the (conscious and unconscious) biases and intentions of its creators and (incidentally as well as actively) opens certain socio-political options and closes others (Winner, 1986; Chandler, 1995). For Winner, technology is situated within and influenced by social processes through actors who create, design and implement it, but also simultaneously affects social outcomes in subtle ways, and some technologies are more compatible with some social patterns than others.

Winner argues that particular technologies are solutions to particular issues facing particular communities. In his most cited example, Winner describes how Robert Moses, a significant builder of public works in New York City from the 1920s to the 1970s, designed overpasses in public parkways to be too low for buses. This then discouraged public transport access, which was used primarily by racial minorities and the poor. These groups were then less able to access and enjoy the public spaces (Winner, 1986). This analysis has similarly been applied by Colin Salter to the opportunistic political and economic machinations conceived

and actualised by the Stockland property group in Australia in their development of Sandon Point (2009).

Similarly, Winner argues that the mechanical tomato harvester's increased productivity benefitted large growers at the expense of smaller growers and farm workers. Smaller growers could not apply the technology to their plots and so the number of growers fell from 4000 to 600 between 1960 and 1973; farm workers were replaced by the machinery itself (Winner, 1986a: 291-293). Consumers also suffered as the harvesters had a negligible effect on the costs of production and required a tougher, less tasty tomato to survive the mechanised process (Winner, 1986a: 291-293). These technologies therefore impose systems of order as solutions to perceived societal issues and interests (*viz.*, society's influence over technology), but these systems also contain many different possibilities of imposing order, which directly and indirectly influence human activity. Within these processes of design, implementation and operation, people are arrayed differently and thus operate with differing degrees of power and awareness within the system. Over time, flexibility of operating within a system reduces, as investment, knowledge and social habit 'lock in' certain possibilities long term.

Winner also argues that there are "inherently political technologies" - technologies which require or are strongly compatible with particular political relationships. Winner posits that regimes regulating artefacts such as nuclear weapons must be inherently authoritarian and hierarchical. Given the extreme consequences of error, such as accidental detonation, nuclear weapons require "[control] by a centralized, rigidly hierarchical chain of command closed to all influences that might make its workings unpredictable" (1986a: 297). Similarly, Winner describes Engels' descriptions of how "unavoidable authoritarianism" is required in the workings of factories, railways and ships at sea, or, by contrast, how the technically decentralised and politically decentralising nature of solar power makes it strongly compatible with (albeit not requiring) socially and politically democratic systems (1986b: 32-3).

On the other hand, Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar and Geoff Cooper have all emphasised ‘contingency’ theories of technology opposed to Winner’s ‘control’ theory. Latour argues that the unintended consequences of the design of automatic door closers, for instance, discriminates against “very little and very old persons ... furniture removers and in general everyone with packages, which usually means, in our late capitalist society, working or lower-middle class employees” (Latour, 1988, in: Joerges, 1999a: 414). Steve Woolgar and Geoff Cooper instead insist that the Moses’ bridges parable demonstrates both confirmation bias and irony, in that a definitive political moral is constructed from the ambiguity of “Chinese Whispers” that ironically closes off other competing academic arguments (Woolgar, 1991, in: Joerges, 1999a: 415; Woolgar and Cooper, 1999; see also Joerges, 1999b). Bernward Joerges offers the most measured criticism, rejecting Winner’s philosophical paradigm of technology for one where technology is situated as ‘boundary objects’ “[avoiding] preconceived notions of control or contingency” as technical instruments are institutionalised and re-institutionalised in reciprocal renegotiations between what the bridges represent through their form and how they are used in practice (1999a: 424).

More recently, Andrew Feenberg has advocated his own critical approach, which he has described as a “concretized” application inspired by Marcuse, Marx, Foucault and Habermas (2009: 147). Feenberg describes technology as “not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term, but an ‘ambivalent’ process of development suspended between different possibilities” (Feenberg, 2002: 15; Fuchs, 2016b). It is shaped by social purposes and values of capital in its design and development (Feenberg, 2002; Allmer, 2014). Moreover, Feenberg asserts the need for both a theoretically and empirically oriented approach (2005: 62).

#### **- Fuchs’s dialectic approach**

Christian Fuchs elaborates a dialectic concept of technology and society grounded in critical theory, defined by a strong normative dimension to analysis, a renewed interest in the work of Marx and a related political praxis. Unlike the monocausal, essentialist techno-deterministic and techno-centric analysis, the dialectic approach rests upon the foundation that society and technology continually influence each other in a reciprocal, circular fashion, rather than in one-dimensional terms or net effects. Daniel Chandler asserts that “[b]eing critical of technological determinism is not to discount the importance of the fact that the technical features of different communication technologies facilitate different kinds of use, though the potential applications of technologies are not necessarily realized” (1995). Fuchs accepts that social media and technology can temper society one way or another, but he situates that within political, cultural, social, economic and institutional structures that technology exists.

Inherent to the model Fuchs proposes and essential to avoid a monocausal relationship between technology and society is the expression of the technology/society relationship as contradictions (2014a: 204-5). In Fuchs’s framework, social media platforms – as with all forms of media – have contradictory effects in different social/geographic/temporal contexts, either dampening or amplifying or having no effect whatsoever (2014: 206). Similarly, in broadening the perspectives, different forms of media stand contradictory with each other, just as media stands contradictory to other forms of technology, and technology to other macro factors such as political, economic and cultural structures (2014a: 206). In comparison to techno-deterministic analysis, Fuchs’s model does not consider social media to cause social emancipation or mobilisation (extreme techno-optimism), which Fuchs attributes instead to societal crises caused by economic, political, ideological and/or cultural issues, nor does it essentially, universally have one-directional positive or negative effects. As Daniel Trottier and Fuchs summarise, “[s]ocial media are neither causes of these phenomena nor are they entirely unimportant” (2015: 34).

Fundamentally, the critical approach does not dictate that social media must or must not create solely revolutionary or evolutionary potentials. Rather, these potentials depend upon context. As Fuchs describes, “[t]he Internet’s power structures are not profoundly different from those of traditional mass media, yet it has new potentials and limits that interact with structures of accumulation in the economy, the political system and the cultural system” (2016: 26). On the one hand, social media platforms, like traditional media, “are very good means for documenting these experiences and making them available to a broader public” (Fuchs, 2016a: 82). At the same time, the same advert-driven platforms emphasise the social value of network connectedness in order “to mask the commodification of data and the logic of capital accumulation” that makes them commercially viable (Fuchs, 2016a: 69). Political potentials do not exist in strict, absolute and universal binary, but are context-dependent. The internet’s potentials should therefore neither be overstated or ignored.

This approach has several advantages. First, social media interacts on society either in tandem with or converse to other forms of media and technology and other micro- and macro-societal factors. For instance, the communication capabilities of social media worked simultaneously with other forms of communication, and with economic and political factors, to create the conditions for co-ordinated political demonstrations in the Arab Spring. Second, these are unpredictable and context-dependant; for example, the capability of social media to co-ordinate mass protest in the Middle East also creates the possibility to of widespread and geographically disparate rioting, community damage and the breakdown of social order in the 2011 England riots. Third, a contextualised analysis avoids making reductionist claims of ‘net’ positive or negative effects. As such, one can therefore accept that, in any one case study, there may be several seemingly contradictory effects. In the case of the Arab Spring, social media is reconciled as both used by activists to co-ordinate and share information and by police to identify dissidents in a society where the state controls internet access, depending on the

situation. As Francesca Comunello and Giuseppe Anzera emphasise, in the Arab Spring cases, “we are not dealing with a zero-sum game: social media can be effective tools both for the rebels and for the repressive machine” (2012: 465).

Further ameliorating this model is the critical conceptualisation of social media within this framework. Many scholars have advocated a more nuanced perspective of social media, distinct from other abstracting misconceptions that conflate with other technological artefacts. Just as how social media can be situated in society forming contradictory relationships working both for and against state, corporate and community interests, so is it considered simultaneously both revolutionary and evolutionary. On the one hand, different social media applications, such as Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia and LinkedIn (each operating with differing remits), might be considered novel in the way different roles (private, public, civic, politically/economically systemic) and modes of sociality (cognition, communication, cooperation) converge, combine and integrate onto single data profiles (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015: 6; Trottier and Fuchs, 2015: 15). Yet, simultaneously, this model also allows us to recognise that political usage of social media is limited (and perhaps diminishing) and competes in a space of information exchange against attitudes favouring entertainment, popular culture and economically-designated resource asymmetry (Fuchs, 2014a).

On the other hand, critical scholars have described social media as a medium, which, in sharing broad properties with other media (such as communicative form, business models, state regulation and corporate policy and intervention), might be considered ‘old wine in a new bottle’ (Gillespie, 2010: 359; Aouragh, 2012a; Aouragh, 2012b). Trottier and Fuchs conceptualise social media as a “force field” of “complex manifestations of power, counter-power and power contradictions” (2015: 33-4). Similarly, Adam Feenberg describes Internet technologies as “terrains of struggle” that create subtle changes in the conduct of politics by expanding the range and visibility of issues for political action in unpredictable directions

(2015: 121-2). Consequentially, Feenberg argues that restating the case for technology as a structure of politics that is acted through rather than a societal object that is acted upon de-reifies technological artefacts and allows scholars to criticise problematic reductionist technologist discourses (2015: 122). Finally, Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch conceptualise the dialectic relationship between human agents and societal structures (called objects) whereby structures, echoing Winner, “enable and constrain human action and open up a field of possible developments for society and social systems, based on which humans reproduce existing structures or create new structures” (Fuchs, 2014a).

This ‘force field’ manifests in several ways. Most pertinently is how social media companies and their users indirectly interact on each other through the digital architecture of social media platforms. Algorithmic arrangements, for instance, influence user behaviour to conform to defined rules of interaction (likes, comments, shares, etc) and content creation (choices about multimedia, language, etc). This is regulated by visibility/invisibility within the news feed (see Chapter 5). Computational research techniques have provided academics with new avenues and solutions to data collection problems but changing restrictions on data use and the availability of each platform’s infrastructure also provide new challenges (see Chapter 3). The collection of data has influenced the way brands reach their consumers, and targeted advertising has increasingly customised consumer experiences of social media, but collection and targeting techniques are also coming under increased political scrutiny through restrictive data protection regimes.

The critical elements of Fuch’s framework are influenced, naturally, by the work of critical theorists from the Frankfurt School. Both the Frankfurt School and critical theory have drawn upon the critical methods of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Immanuel Kant and others. The critical approach’s increasing relevance coincides with a broader shift in social science towards a renewed interest in Marx and Marxian thought following the 2007 financial crash



(demonstrated by Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015: 11). Ironically, Marx is often interpreted as a technological and/or economic determinist by scholars such as Engels, Heilbroner and even Winner (Heilbroner, 1995; see also Llobera, 1979; Bimber, 1990,). Critics often refer to his infamous quote from *The Poverty of Philosophy* that: “[t]he hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist” (Heilbroner, 1995: 54). Indeed, even defenders of Marx acknowledge that, when writing at his most polemic, “a number of passages can be found that convey the idea that he espoused a techno-economic conception of history” (Llobera, 1979: 263; see also Brantlinger, 2010). However, authors such as Josep Llobera and Bruce Bimber assert that the dialectic method Marx employed specifically undermines the characterisation of Marx as a determinist. Bimber, for example, gives a brief example of Marx’s analysis of automation in manufacturing. Marx considered the inherent characteristics of industrial automation should have led to a shortening of the working day for workers, but that owners were actually lengthening the workday to countenance increased productivity into increase total output (Bimber, 1990: 348). Thus, the expected outcomes that should have been generated by new manufacturing technology did not overcome the oppositional effects of the organisational tendencies of management. Fundamentally, in this instance, the actions of social actors superseded the influence of technology.

The dialectic approach does not mean accepting technological determinism, nor overcompensating by embracing alternative perspectives to be discussed below. The aim of the approach, through layered and multi-causal analysis, is implicitly both a critique of the techno-celebratory attitudes of the techno-optimists and the criticism of the techno-celebratory attitudes (disguised as criticisms of social media) of the techno-pessimists. Rather, a dialectical approach considers how multiple complex systems interact in numerous, complex and unpredictable ways in a variety of contexts. Social media, society and technology are said to condition rather than determine each other: social contexts - the interests and conflict of any

society in question - influence the direction of technological evolution and which technologies emerge, whilst technological contexts - actualised technique, technical knowledge, media and technological artefacts - shape certain social contexts for particular people, processes and institutions.

## **Technological Neutrality**

Though this study advocates the critical approach, there are several other competing alternatives that critique techno-determinism. The most prominent of these have entered popular discourses as well as academic. One group of critics often emphasise that, rather than having an inherent normative effect on politics and society, technology is politically neutral. Techno-neutrality posits an instrumentalist theory of technology, conceptualising artefacts like new media as ‘tools’, indifferent to positive and negative social impact. Instrumentalist theories of technology within academia represents a “liberal faith in [technological] progress” (Feenberg, 2009).

Techno-neutrality theoretically positions itself between the two ‘poles’ of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. For ‘techno-neutrals’ the net effect of technology depends not on any inherent normativity but the normative decisions of the person using it; positive and negative outcomes are reflections of the user rather than the technology itself (Chandler, 1995; Feenberg, 2002: 6; Wu, 2013). This instrumental view of technology is best illustrated by oft-quoted Simon Mainwaring, who famously asserted that, “[l]ike all technology, social media is neutral but is best put to work in the service of building a better world” (2011). For Mainwaring and other techno-neutrals, technology is simply a tool working as a force-multiplier through which people can enact positive or negative change in society.

From an academic perspective, techno-neutrals consider social media to empower both authoritarian regimes for oppressive purposes as well as democratic regimes for progressive purposes (Joseph, 2012). Vaseilos Karagiannopoulos considers that, regarding the use of social media by both pro- and anti-regime elements in Iran and Egypt, “[t]he internet remains essentially a neutral tool and, as Lawrence Lessig has argued, it is in its nature to be able to facilitate benign as well as malign purposes” (2012: 171). Techno-neutrality rests upon the conceptualisation of techno-optimists and pessimists as an oppositional binary and positions itself as a moderate, conciliatory approach between two rhetorical extremes. Categorising contributors to the social media debate as ‘techno-neutrals’ however, presents a challenge, as contributors may consider the techno-determinist binary to be pejorative and frame their own work as techno-neutral or techno-realist.

The most culturally-relevant mobilisation of techno-neutrality pervades discourse on gun ownership in America. Techno-neutrality is best exemplified in the National Rifle Association’s short, oft-quoted slogan: “guns don’t kill people; people kill people”. The slogan asserts an instrumental conceptualisation of guns, arguing that a weapon has no agency and thus cannot choose to be used and how or why, and reminds and warns the audience of the requirement of a user and the necessity of a user projecting their own agency on guns for negative outcomes to occur. The subtext of the slogan reaffirms that guns could also be used as a deterrent or protection against people who would use guns for negative purposes, thereby balancing the negative consequences of gun ownership (gun crime, mass shootings, gun-related accidents) with perceived positives (protection from assailants). As such, techno-neutrality removes ethical questions around technology. Because the consequences of any tool or technique’s use depends solely upon the intentions and agency of the user, discussions about the ethics of technology can be separated from ethical questions about use entirely.

If tools such as social media cannot have *mens rea*, they cannot inherently cause negative consequences of use. Techno-neutrals imply that technology is exceptional and distinctive from other functional social systems, such as legal systems and religious institutions, characterised instead as it is by a perceived indifference to politics. Yet, as a force multiplier, technology is attributed praise as a conduit for positive socio-political outcomes. In this sense, technology can still be considered as instrumental to societal change as positive effects are enhanced or expanded.

Critiques of technological neutrality have come from both technological determinists and anti-techno-determinists alike. However, unlike determinism, critical theory rejects the characterisation of technology as value-free. Jacques Ellul argues that technology imposes technical constraints on usage whilst also acting reciprocally on users themselves: “[n]o matter how [a particular technology] is used, it has of itself a number of positive and negative consequences” irrespective of intention, and that “technical development is neither good, bad, nor neutral” (Ellul, 1990: 35-7; Chandler, 1995). Langdon Winner similarly states that technologies (accidentally as much as actively) open certain social options and close others and might be more compatible with specific social patterns (Winner, 1986; Chandler, 1995). Neil Postman argues that the medium of technology, due to the form, structure and conditions of use of different technological instruments, contains ideological biases. As Postman observes, “to a man with a pencil, everything looks like a list ... [t]o a man with a camera, everything looks like an image ... [t]o a man with a computer, everything looks like data” (1993: 14). Chandler summarises these perspectives and asserts that “[b]eing critical of technological determinism is not to discount the importance of the fact that the technical features of different communication technologies facilitate different kinds of use, though the potential applications of technologies are not necessarily realized” (1995).

Lelia Green is one critic who argues against the exogenous nature of technology. She posits that technological determinism and techno-neutrality both conceive of a system where “the scientific rules behind the development and application of technology are more effective and non-negotiable than the social and cultural dynamics that shape the communities and countries in which we live” (2010: 8). As an example, she describes the development of SMS texting as a way of emphasising how society shapes technology. Though SMS was envisaged for and packaged in mobile phone products as a minor component that complimented voice calling, Finnish teenagers (Finland being the first nation with cross-network functionality on a competitive basis) took up text messaging as the major mobile application given its ease and cheapness, leading to the eventual ubiquity of texting beyond the original intentions of the developers (2010: 10). This also applies to internet technologies, which have similarly outgrown their origins of basic networked computers at DARPA to become ubiquitous precisely because of society’s demand-pull influence on its development beyond its contained use with the Armed Forces.

These examples form the basis of Green’s arguments against techno-neutrality. Green deconstructs the example of guns in response to the NRA’s neutrality narrative (Chandler, 1995). For Green, because technology exists within society, and thus is implicated in non-neutral social processes, it cannot itself be neutral (2001). She asserts that guns can only be considered neutral if society is ignorant of their existence, purpose or effects. Obviously, this criterion is ahistorical: guns have been produced exclusively by humans, exclusively for human use, and become familiar in form and ubiquitous in presence in almost every developed human culture, primarily as weapons of war but also as recreational or sporting equipment, in signalling, as tools and as toys in the form of replicas. Children picking up sticks and brandishing them at one another as they would firearms - even making associated gun noises and mimicking the effects of being shot – is further evidence that humans are not ignorant of

their existence, purpose or effects. Chandler argues that, “[r]ather than being ‘outside’ society, technology is an inextricable part of it” (1995). Because guns were designed to be offensive weapons and, moreover, people know of guns to be such, their potentials and usage are defined by this. For Green, what is significant about this is how to respond to technology in society. In the gun example, Green contrasts the Port Arthur and Dunblane massacres with respective cases in the USA (2001: 3-5). In the cases of Port Arthur and Dunblane, both massacres resonated such that the Tasmanian and British governments respectively similarly intervened and introduced stricter gun controls. By contrast, in the US, similar incidents dissimilarly result in greater gun advocacy in certain areas of society. These differing reactions occurred despite ubiquitous awareness of the societal context of firearms. As such, Green supposes a relationship between different communities and the power that various technologies confer.

## **Social determinism**

Despite being presented as an alternative to techno-determinism, technological neutrality still advances a techno-centric framework for analysis, even as popular discourse might consider it to be a common-sense alternative. As implied by Leila Green’s critique of techno-neutrality, techno-centric analysis disregards the influence of social factors on technology. Conversely, social determinism examines the impact of society and socio-political institutions on the development of technology with reference to the needs of relevant social groups (Pannabecker, 1991; see also Winner, 1980; Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999). Social determinism is often presented as oppositional to several other contentious determinist doctrines in other academic disciplines, such as biological determinism (particularly in the field

of gender studies and the discipline of sociology) and environmental determinism, and its pervasiveness as a critique of techno-determinism in particular necessarily warrants discussion.

One strand of social determinism, typologised by Isidoro Paolo Castelfrione, is referred to as the ‘normaliser’ approach, drawn primarily from political science literature. As with techno-neutrals, so-called ‘normalisers’ consider their approach to be a ‘moderate’ conceptualisation of social media. Castelfrione describes these scholars as advancing the position “in which the Internet has supplementary effects ... reinforcing current participatory trends” on civic engagement in society (2014). Though not a social determinist himself, asserting that “the Internet has, in part, transformed the way of doing politics” (2014), Castelfrione sympathises with the normaliser position. Despite citing a lack of conclusive evidence supporting either techno- or social determinists, he argues that the latter has “found the most support in the literature” (2014).

John Pannabecker gives an example of the influence of social groups on the development of the safety bicycle from the high-wheeler of nineteenth century. He suggests that the stabilisation of modern bicycle design was due to a conflation of the concerns of social actors including women, young men, elderly persons, sportspersons, manufacturers and technologists, which included factors such as image, safety, speed, social traditions, economics and available materials (1991: 5-6). Normalisers in this sense therefore believe that “online political activities are perceived in this sense as an extension of off-line [*sic*] ones” (Castelfrione, 2014; see also Norris, 2001; Krueger, 2002: 493; Polat, 2005: 453-5; Wang, 2007: 393; Park and Perry, 2008: 262-3). Traditional political organisations, for instance, might utilise modern networking sites and discussion forums to create and maintain weak ties between members to maintain voter share; traditional media outlets might similarly utilise online methods of distribution to maintain market share (Calenda and Meijer, 2009: 893).

One quantitative study into the link between Facebook usage and intensity and political participation amongst students at an American university undertaken by Jessica Vitak *et al.* found that students generally found political expression appropriate and that there existed a positive correlation between general political participation and use of Facebook for political purposes (2011). The study also found a correlation between intensity of Facebook usage and political activity on Facebook, but also found a strong negative correlation between Facebook intensity and general political participation (2011: 112-3). Consequently, Vitak *et al.* reject the slacktivist explanation categorically for all but the most Facebook-intensive students, instead emphasising the potential use of Facebook as a resource-minimal opportunity to practice civic skills (2011: 112). Studies such as those undertaken by Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, Nils Gustafsson, Giovanna Mascheroni, Juliet Carlisle and Robert Patton have added further support to both the aspects of the normaliser stance (Gustafsson, 2012; Mascheroni, 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012; Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Casteltrione, 2014).

However, for normalisers, broadened and deepened of modes of political engagement are tempered by examining who the beneficiaries of these effects are. Academics amongst this group argue that only already politically-interested citizens benefit from internet technologies in civil engagement as these technologies only strengthen and amalgamate existing systems rather than change individual-level attitudes to political participation beyond those of a certain age (Bimber, 2001: 63-4; Krueger, 2002: 493; Bimber, 2003: 237; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 2003: 141; Polat, 2005: 453-5; Linder and Riehm, 2009: 19; Casteltrione, 2014). Instead, normalisers exaggerate existing gendered, economic, political and educational biases within society. Jennifer Brundidge and Ronald E. Rice, in their study of political discussion amongst heterogeneous networks of citizens, found that citizens with high socioeconomic status and levels of political knowledge - the information 'rich' - were more likely to utilise new internet-based information resources (2009: 154). Heinz Bonfadelli identified four causes of inequities



in access that could cause this: lack of skills with, connected fears of and negative attitudes towards computer technologies amongst older and/or less educated people; barriers to access; lack of user-friendliness and user-compatibility; and online behavioural attitudes primarily correlated to education (2002: 81). Other normalisers emphasise different potential barriers. Brian Krueger asserts that if inequalities of access can be overcome, internet technologies can in turn remove barriers to political participation (2002: 494). Bonfiadelli, meanwhile posits that, even given equal access, user-dependent variables will remain regardless.

Ultimately, Casteltrione and other scholars reject social determinism as a working alternative to technological determinism within the social media debate. These studies have in particular questioned the pro-participatory aspect of the normaliser position, rejecting both the assumptions of civic engagement in citizens' interactions and of a positive pro-civic community building as a consequence of these interactions. Separate studies by Monica Ancu, Raluca Cozma, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, examining users of popular social media platforms who seemingly engaged with political figures and movements, found that people tended to use these platforms to interact with like-minded users and seek out supporting views (Ancu and Cozma, 2009; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010). Baumgartner and Morris, as well as Sebastián Valenzuela, Namsu Park and Kerk Kee, further opined that SNSs only had limited impact on the political participation of young people and were not the most effective solution to the broader social issue of general youth disengagement (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009: 894-5; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Casteltrione, 2014).

Beyond these critiques, Natalie Fenton and Veronica Barassi reject the participation aspect of the normaliser stance entirely and have posited that social media may in fact have a negative impact on civic society. They argue that social media emphasises political individualism and politics of the self, which “denigrates the collective creativity of politics”, and that the normaliser stance both reflects and entrenches techno-optimism (Fenton and

Barassi, 2011: 190-3). Casteltrione himself posits that a differential approach is imperative “to move away from the polarised debate between optimists, pessimists and normalisers and favour the development of the field” (2014).

Fuchs, similarly, criticises social determinism (2014). Just as techno-optimism and techno-pessimism construct and either fetishise or demonise technology’s effects on society, social determinisms also “lack a sense of contradictions and the dialectics of technology and society” (Fuchs, 2014a: 202). Several counter-examples illustrate this point. Alexander Graham Bell’s invention of the telephone, for instance, can be explained by the social factors on his career path, field of study and personal life (McLuhan, 1964; Chandler, 1994). Bell was particularly influenced by the work of his grandfather, father and brother in the study of speech, sound and elocution and was inspired by the deafness of his mother and wife. As such, the invention of the first practical working telephone can be attributed to Bell’s social environment. The issue with the social determinist analysis, however, is the resulting reciprocal effects, both positive and negative, of the telephone on society as certain social actors continued to influence the development and application of phone technologies. On the one hand, the telephone “facilitated ‘the efficient organization and operation of large-scale, integrated mass production manufacturing enterprises’” (Aronson, 1971, cited in Chandler, 1995), supported more dynamic social relationships, business ventures and emergency services, and created new spaces for industries such as telecommunications providers and telemarketing (Chandler, 1994). Moreover, the phone had a profound economic impact on the telegram and postal industries and those that depended on them. However, the telephone also created a personally intrusive, insistent form of communication. As Donald Ball mused, “it is normatively defined that one is expected to, that one *should* answer a signalling phone’s implicit invitation to interaction” (1968, cited in Chandler, 1995).

## Actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) is a conceptual framework and methodological approach developed by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon and advocated by John Law. ANT advocates describe it as a ‘sociotechnical’ approach, combining elements of techno-centric and social approaches. Fundamentally, ANT characterises actors in terms of the relationships between them and outcomes caused by constant shifts in networks that these relationships form. ANT does not seek to explain social phenomena but describe how networks are constructed and how they operate.

Actor-network theory has two central pillars. Whilst other frameworks consider society and technology to be fundamentally and functionally discrete, ANT conceptualises both humans and non-humans (technological artefacts and techniques) as ‘actants’. Both human and non-human actants are ontologically treated as equals due to the difficulty to differentiate between the human and technical influences in producing technology as both technical and human influences are themselves mediated by the sociocultural background from which they originate. Indeed, Latour and others have expressed the preference to refer to actors as actants as the term ‘actor’ connotes anthropocentric action. For actor-network theorists, technology is partly influenced by technique and partly by social factors; similarly, society is partly influenced by the social and partly by technique.

Actants are significant because they form relationships with other actants to form greater assemblages. Actants within an assemblage represent individual nodes of a network. For instance, an Uber driver might represent one node of an assemblage equal to and in relationship with the taxi and the Uber app. However, ANT conceptualises the construction of assemblages beyond discrete webs of actants. Rather, each node is formed from an assemblage

of constituent nodes, and each assemblage upwardly forms another node in a greater assemblage. In this example, the app might be an assemblage of app developers, programming languages, phone infrastructure and so on; the taxi might be an assemblage of designers, the manufacturing techniques, machinery, and so on. Moreover, certain assemblages are conceptualised as ‘black boxes’. Black boxes are assemblages of nodes that maintain strong relationships with each other, acting together to ensure consistent functionality, and typically taken as a single actant. Harman, describing black boxes, asserts that “[w]e have a true black box when a statement is simply presented as a raw fact without any reference to its genesis or even its author” (2009: 37).

ANT has some advantages as an analytical framework. Darryl Cressman asserts that ANT can “better reveal the complexities of our sociotechnical world” (2009: 2). He argues that ANT explores the questions of “why and how we have the technologies that we do” (2009: 10). Significantly, because ANT treats both human and nonhumans as actants of equal importance, it avoids essentialism and heterogeneity when analysing actants themselves, as actants cannot be reduced by any other characteristic beyond that they are actants and exist in relation to other actants. Moreover, ANT avoids technological and social determinism because all actants are conceived as equal. No particular weight is given to technological actants beyond that of non-technological actants and vice versa.

However, the validity of assigning equal agency across all actors, human and technological within ANT is contentious. In the most problematic sense, this means that ANT effectively ignores societal structures of power and dismisses basic social dynamics regarding race, class, sex, gender and sexuality, as well as Eurocentrism, Orientalism and colonialism (Harding, 2008; Quinlan, 2012). Cressman, in his evaluation of actor-network theory, argues that ANT does not account for a dialectic interpretation of the social and technological, nor does it account for human experience “outside of pre-established categories or models” (2009:

10). Simultaneously, ANT has a tendency to overstate the importance of even the most basic forms of technology. ANT suggests that even very basic forms of technology, such as a cardboard box, has equatable agency in an assemblage to a person. Finally, ANT's analytical utility is questionable. First, given that a node may be conceived of as an assemblage that can be deconstructed into more nodes that are themselves assemblages, *ad finitum*, networks and nodes might therefore be continually deconstructed into smaller nodes and smaller networks so as to lose any epistemological utility. Second, network boundaries can be difficult to objectively delineate and are often left to the researcher's prerogative. Finally, ANT focuses on describing the composition of networks, assemblages and nodes, rather than encouraging any examination of the causes and effects of relationships between and within networks.

### **Algorithms under the critical approach**

Algorithms have become a topic of debate within the public sphere, as decision-making within society is increasingly delegated to and mediated by these processes, including social, business and bureaucratic interactions (Mittelstadt *et al.*, 2016). Questions have risen about the design, ethics, transparency, scrutiny and reliability of algorithms and associated machine learning within the contexts they operate. However, relatively little academic literature focuses on the effects of algorithms on the social media strategies of political parties, groups and social movements.

Precisely, the term 'algorithm' refers to procedures designed to fulfil a specific purpose, such as problem-solving and decision-making, that are defined precisely enough for computers to execute. Thore Husfeldt compares algorithms to recipes, where ingredients are data and processes involve selections or repetitions with different iterations with varying costs and speed

(2017). Though algorithms have entered the cultural zeitgeist as a dirty word (Hanley, 2018), and have increasingly been scrutinised in the UK and abroad, Husfeldt suggests that an internet without algorithms would be as difficult to navigate as a library without the Dewey Decimal System (2017). Part of what has made Google so successful, for example, is the PageRank algorithm, which customises search results based on algorithmic expectations of user searches based on collected data about said users to maximise the chances of a quick, correct search engine hit.

Different platforms rely on different algorithmic arrangements to operate, and different algorithms prioritise different signals. Facebook's algorithms, for example, influence what a user sees in their News Feed, and so influence content visibility for business, charitable causes, political actors and others against all other competing businesses, causes, and campaigns. YouTube's algorithms, similarly, decide what content is surfaced to user home pages, 'Up Next' feeds and in notifications (Mazereeuw, 2017). Twitter, finally, upon opening the app, displays top ranked tweets and 'in case you missed it' tweets to users first before displaying other tweets in reverse-chronological order. Algorithms therefore influence both the behaviour of general users, influencing choices they can make, and the social media content strategy of brands and users trying to get their content in front of as large an audience as possible.

Facebook began experimenting with algorithms following the (controversial) launch of its News Feed (Kolowich, 2016). Prior to the News Feed, Facebook was simply a collection of individual profiles that users had to navigate to in order to view the activity of other users. As Facebook's Ruchi Sanghvi announced at the time, the News Feed allowed users to "get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups" (2006). According to Facebook's Vice President of Product Chris Cox, initial adjustments to the News Feed rankings "was turning knobs ... [t]urn up photos a little bit, turn down platform stories a little bit" (McGee, 2013). Subsequently, Facebook began using EdgeRank, which differed from the

‘knob-turning’ approach in that it attributed quality measures to posts and then ranked them for display in users’ News Feeds (McGee, 2013). EdgeRank depended on three primary signals: *affinity* (closeness of relationship between user and source); *weight* (type of action taken to that post); and *decay* (the post’s timeliness).

Facebook moved away from EdgeRank in early 2011 to a more complex ranking algorithm. In its current iteration, the algorithm has four components (Peters, 2018). The first component, *inventory*, comprises all available content to users within their networks. Algorithms classify and assign quality measures that define content relevance to other users with the network. Relevance is determined by *signals*, which are themselves measures of social activity. Signals can be straightforward, derived from user activity, or relatively unconventional, such as spelling mistakes, profile completeness and posts frequency (Gallagher, 2017; Husfeldt, 2017). Relevance interplays with the third component, *predictions*, which are probabilities that users will interact with any given post. Using a vector space model, Facebook represents users as vectors within high-dimensional space, where different dimensions correspond to individual signals (Husfeldt, 2017). Deviation in angles between vectors theoretically corresponds to differences in human tastes, interests and tendencies. The quantifiable actualisation of relevance that attempts to predict the likelihood of user interest and engagement is reflected by an overall *score*.

However, machine learning algorithms are trial and error codes, accruing long lines of code that are impossible to parse. Therefore, algorithmic predictions should be conceptualised as externalisations of user typifications based on perceived rationales that algorithms deduct from observed user behaviour. Because algorithms can only deduce predictions based on observations, these tend to be simplistic, stereotyped representations.

Social media algorithms work to prioritise content in users’ browser feeds based on the probability that they’ll want to see it, based on expected operating parameters of their platform.

Any analysis of social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, should refer to algorithms that underpin them. As Mittelstadt *et al* note, “how we perceive and understand our environments and interact with them and each other is increasingly mediated by algorithms” (2016). Comparing changes in algorithms made by social media developers to changes (if any) in the social media strategy of groups can help researchers understand how invested in and how significant digital campaigning is to how these groups aim to achieve their objectives.

Algorithms are an example of critical theory dialectics at work. If the economic form of social media is best described as an attention economy, algorithms decide what content users are most likely to want to see and engage with. Bucher, in her examination of EdgeRank, perfectly encapsulates the outcome of Facebook’s News Feed regime as an inversion of the ‘regime of visibility’ described by Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault symbolises the organisation of power within the architecture of the Panopticon, a theoretical system of control designed by Jeremy Bentham. In the Panopticon, inmates are arranged in cells that surround a central watchtower; though it is impossible for a single guard to monitor all the inmates, the inmates’ uncertainty as to whether they are visible to guard in the watchtower causes them to conform to idealised, disciplined behaviour as though they were.

Bucher argues that this architecture is reversed within the News Feed, noting: “[the] problem as it appears is not the possibility of constantly being observed, but the possibility of constantly disappearing ... to become visible, one needs to follow a certain platform logic embedded in the architecture of Facebook” (2012). Bucher also asserts that the News Feed inverts the Panopticon in two other aspects. In the Panopticon, all inmates are seen all the time: “totally seen,” as Foucault asserts, “without ever seeing” (1977: 202). In the News Feed, algorithm does not consider all users equally and regimes of privilege and punishment, or visibility and invisibility, are not permanent; users are ranked differently to different people at different times and by different outputs.



Yet, even as social media companies claim that the algorithms enhance user experience, political groups and their content are often most affected. The need to be visible, ideally at the expense of competitors, influences brand behaviour. This has led to a market for social media strategy to provide advice for content creation and proliferation, updated as algorithms themselves are reconfigured. As Bucher observes, “[w]hile many individual users may not be aware of the algorithmic politics behind the News Feed, this has become one of the main concerns for businesses and organizations that want to reach their desired audience” (2012). The effects this can have are considered very much real and potentially existentially threatening. As described in Reuters’ most recent Digital News Report, one news publisher, Little Things, that went out of business in 2018 cited “Facebook’s algorithm changes” as a critical factor.

Facebook constantly tweaks its algorithm to optimise user experience. This might involve improvements in data collection, such as increasing the number of signals, and changing certain interfaces, like expanding the like button to incorporate broad reactions. Otherwise, it might involve changing the weighting of specific signals with reference to others. As algorithms make it more likely for content to appear in users’ feeds, it is reasonable to link long-term changes in behaviour and engagement to changes to Facebook’s algorithm. Similarly, by comparing algorithmic adjustments to changes in behaviour or engagement, we can evaluate how groups perform relative to the expectations of Facebook and to other pages such as marketers, brands and political parties.

Though algorithms clearly influence brand exposure and user behaviour, analysis of their impact should not default to techno-determinism. Algorithms are themselves influenced by social factors, both by users and by developers. At the front end, algorithmic arrangements correspond to signals obtained from user data to prioritise content that what a user will most likely want to see, and more broadly what signals social media companies expect will most

likely convey and quantify these tastes. As Sunstein notes: “these developments ... can obviously increase fun, convenience, learning and entertainment ... [a]lmost no one wants to see advertisements for products that don’t interest them” (2017: 4). Indeed, in 2016, a study undertaken by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that in almost every country, personalised news recommendations based on past consumption (algorithmically selected) were considered preferable to receiving news selected by news editors and journalists or automatically based on friends’ consumption (2016: 111-2). In the case of YouTube, algorithms undertake editorial processes to keep viewers watching. Four hundred hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every second, which makes YouTube’s algorithm integral to users’ consumption. First, it allows the platform to surface videos relevant to any particular user from a quantity that would be impossible for a human editor to select from and impossible for a human user to choose from. This means that content can be catered for individual users and often is sourced from producers, known as ‘influencers’, with no pre-existing platform or brand associations and would otherwise not be prominent content creators. Second, it allows the platform to automatically surface videos based on quantifiable quality measures, such as high rates of viewership, view velocity (the rate of gain in viewership), audience retention, shares and embedding.

At the back end, similarly, algorithms are influenced by the values of developers. Mittelstadt *et al.* describe algorithms as “inescapably value-laden”, as “[o]perational parameters are specified by developers and configured by users with desired outcomes in mind that privilege some values and interests over others” (2016: 1). Fundamentally, the architecture of social media platforms, operationalised by algorithmic arrangements, are designed to maximise user engagements with posts they ostensibly want to see. Engagements are then harvested, datafied and repurposed for predictive and real-time analytics that can then be marketised (Van Dijk and Poell, 2013: 9). This can actualise in several forms beyond simple

advertising. Data, for instance, is gathered based on user responsiveness to adverts; even ‘opting out’ and not clicking on adverts signal to algorithms that the system needs to be refined, which is then deployed against other people (Naughton and Cobbe, 2018). This happens in real time: Facebook advertising explicitly allows advertisers to upload several images, and autogenerates and reconfigures adverts based on what images are best received by the target audience. Similarly, surfacing engaging content increases the likelihood of a user staying on the platform, which exposes them to more advertising. The normativity of algorithms extends beyond privileging data-driven economic principles, however. Latanya Sweeney, for example, found that there was statistically significant discrimination on two websites, including Google, in the delivery of online advertising based on searches of personal names associated with people of colour, including generating adverts suggestive of arrest (2013). Algorithms do not exist independent of the economic, racial and social hierarchies of power that manifest within our society, but rather replicate and entrench them, even as they influence behaviour online.

## **Concluding remarks**

Though critics of techno-determinism present several alternative concepts of technology, a dialectic approach presents the most adequate framework for analysis. It subsumes valid, contradictory cases from across the body of social media literature and moves away from the impact-focused analysis of the determinists and techno-centrists. It recognises that technology, society and other factors exist in a state of mutual reinforcement and reciprocity and function as structures that amplify or diminish political action. Within these structures, political action also competes against other factors, either in direct opposition or that may crowd actors out. Social media does not directly or inherently create, drive or oppose

social change, but it is one factor among many involved in these processes. The next chapter shall describe the research methods selected for the case studies as informed by this chapter.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter shall first provide a brief overview of key issues that faced this thesis. Subsequently, it shall discuss the overarching mixed methods approach and the reasoning behind this decision. The chapter shall then move to a discussion of the main problems that needed to be addressed both before and during the study, including the collection of and access to data and how to analyse a dataset of such quantity. In particular, the technologically-enabled research tools, following in the relatively recent tradition of computational social science, that streamlined the process of data collection and categorisation shall be discussed. Finally, this chapter shall describe the specific research methods and ethical considerations undertaken throughout the course of the research.

#### **Main issues**

The use of social media by Western radical right groups presents an interesting niche within broader radical right literature. The digital aims, strategies and outcomes of these groups have rarely been considered when conducting research into these groups, and specific examinations of social media strategies are often limited to those groups that are known for maintaining an effective presence on these platforms. Several studies that mention the significance of various groups' social media presence often omit specific, in-depth research of owned or affiliated social media channels beyond cursory overview of the use of Facebook

groups in organisation and mobilisation. Moreover, the examination of such groups is presently almost non-existent within the social media debate. That being said, several studies have suggested that research into the politics of social media was both possible and practical and influenced broader considerations in conducting research in this area.

The methodological approach had to address several tensions identified prior to research. Fundamentally, the main issue to overcome regarded the scope of the project. First, the research boundaries needed to be effectively delineated in a way that was both practical but also academically rigorous. Second, data collection presented an issue given the quantity of data disseminated by each group. For Facebook alone, Britain First and UKIP combined to produce 43,000 posts from the advent of their channels to 2016. As well as over 43,000 Facebook posts, data from several thousand YouTube videos would need to be gathered in total from both groups to undertake a comprehensive cross-platform study, given that both groups often shared YouTube links to Facebook before the take-up of Facebook-native video. Finally, it was also perceived that there might be tension with incorporating both UKIP and BF in the same study, given the ideological differences and disparities in political legitimacy between the two.

Another issue begged the question of whether evaluating impact of social media on politics was necessarily within the scope of this thesis. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, this thesis refutes the positions that attempt to conceptualise the impacts of social media in terms of net or monocausal effects on society. The critical approach takes the perspective that society and constructs such as social media and other forms of technology maintain multidirectional, multidimensional, co-constitutive and contradictory relationships with each other. Social media is better conceptualised as “a field of power struggles” between elites with “a large share of economic, political and ideological media power” and alternative actors with “less resources, visibility and attention”, rather than a discrete actor in and of itself (Fuchs, 2016b).

Fundamentally, it is another communicative, technological space through which social phenomena express themselves (Fuchs, 2016b). As such, to comprehensively examine the social media strategies of both groups, research focus avoided examining the respective struggles of power in other mediums (such as traditional media) or societal factors. For the same reason, this research could not adequately situate or interrogate the relative importance of social media compared to these other dimensions within either case study beyond how the groups themselves viewed them. Subsequently, it was considered beyond the scope of analysis to comprehensively discuss impacts or effects either on society or social media. Indeed, inferring or generalising reductionistic causal outcomes based on two case studies would be to reject the theoretical groundings altogether.

Finally, there is the question of definitional tensions within radical right literature in discussing UKIP and Britain First together. Fundamentally, this thesis does not treat both groups as exactly alike and the qualitative and quantitative analysis of both groups emphasises the differences between them more often than the similarities. This thesis accepts that the radical right represents a broad church with differing and competing ideological outlooks; this has presented definitional difficulties for scholars that have continued to this day. That said, experts in radical right studies, including Matthew Goodwin, Helen Margetts and Robert Ford, have noted that UKIP has either “strong evidence of policy overlaps” with the BNP or otherwise courted former BNP voters (Goodwin, 2012; Ford, 2014; Margetts, 2016). Notably, these claims have been contested by UKIP. Nigel Farage argued that the party has “played a key role in forcing the toxic far right out of British politics” and have distinguished themselves from these groups by becoming a “legitimate player in British politics” (Ford, 2014).

This study posits the radical right definition posited by Elizabeth Carter. Carter deconstructs the linguistic concept of what she terms as the ‘extreme right’ into two conflated descriptive terms (2005: 17). First, the ‘extreme right’ is defined by an anti-democratic

principle: that is, a rejection of fundamental democratic values and institutions. In other words, this is what makes the extreme right ‘extreme’. Second, the ‘extreme right’ is defined by an anti-constitutional principle: that is, a rejection of fundamental human equality. In other words, this is what makes the extreme right, in the most basic sense, ‘right-wing’. Fundamentally, Carter’s definition incorporates geo-political and historical definitions of right-wing radicalism by acknowledging that the radical right in one nation, culture, society or period might express itself differently from other, and potentially all other, radical right groups across the world.

Margetts, however, argues that future radical right success in Britain may indeed be predicated on the rise of a populist right umbrella party electorally buttressed by more extreme right parties and movements operating on the political periphery (2016). Moreover, as shall be discussed later, Britain First have often considered UKIP an acceptable compromise where they did not stand candidates themselves. Both groups were chosen for several overlapping reasons – their anti-establishment posturing, their non-mainstream status, their non-progressive ideological stances, and their hierarchical structure – that has distinguished these groups from conceptualisations of typified social media actors. Finally, both groups were also chosen because of the relative lack of insight into their social media strategies relative to other groups, such as the EDL and BNP.

## **Methodological Approach**

The overall focus of this study was to identify and analyse the social media strategies of and levels of engagement with Britain First and UKIP. Broadly, the underlying analytical objective was to demonstrate instances that both groups contradicted assumptions presented by techno-deterministic social media literature (discussed in Chapter 1). Techno-optimists



conceptualise social media as progressive, democratic and oppositional to oppressive power structures in society; techno-pessimists argue that social media entrenches political, media and economic elites without considering non-mainstream actors or nativist and nationalist hegemonic structures. Both BF and UKIP explicitly reject progressive politics and current UK political institutions, but also oppose the interests of the political mainstream, traditional media and big business. The aim is to identify trends in content, the medium these messages were conveyed through, and reception from public users, as well as how these trends manifested. Simultaneously, analysis aimed to compliment studies into other aspects of these groups and other examinations of social media as per the dialectic approach.

These groups in particular were identified due to their presence within the UK cultural consciousness and relevance to UK politics since 2013. Moreover, as described in the Introduction, both have been characterised by the significance of social media to their campaign strategy. From 2014 to 2016, the two groups were the eminent radical right groups in the UK. Between 2014 and 2015, UKIP's Facebook following was just short of that of the Conservative Party (276,000 followers compared to 294,000 respectively in 2014 and 414,000 to 426,000 in 2015) and were the most mentioned political party<sup>2</sup> in the run-up to the 2014 European elections (Perraudin, 2014; Wilkinson, 2015). In 2015, Britain First had more Facebook likes than all other parties combined, amassing a million Facebook followers by November 2015, and by December 2017 had consolidated this into 1.9 million Facebook followers and 27,000 Twitter followers, despite being otherwise electorally insignificant (Wilkinson, 2015; Withnall, 2015b; Cobain, 2017). Both groups have also been described in the media and by party members as having strong online presences and coherent, successful

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<sup>2</sup> This total includes both positive and negative mentions, but nonetheless demonstrates members of the public engaging with UKIP online.

social media strategies as an explicit focus and strength of their campaign strategies (Collins, 2015; Ehrenberg, 2015; Joseph, 2015).

This study used a mixed methods research framework to achieve these objectives. This was appropriate due to the dual-faceted nature of the study, providing insight into both the social media and radical right aspects. To provide a complete understanding of both groups' social media strategies, analysis of each case was analysed in turn, divided into two phases. As Wodak notes, from a practical perspective, incorporating quantitative research approaches buttresses the qualitative research against the methodological pitfalls of 'cherry picking' (2013: 15). The first phase comprised the quantitative research. These chapters examined the overarching thematic and multimedia dimensions of both groups' content. In particular, the overall ideological subject of each published piece of content, rates of engagement and rates of medium were analysed, and whether these metrics differed over time. The second phase concerned the qualitative research. These chapters, by contrast, examined how content published by each group was discursively constituted, examining recurring narratives and tropes, themes and literary and visual devices. These chapters also analysed how content was contextualised by the mediums they occupied, be it video, image or text.

Analysis focused primarily on Facebook and YouTube. Naturally, the obvious omission was Twitter. The decision to omit one prominent channel was primarily borne out of limited time to study all channels throughout the period of research. However, the reasons to conduct research into Facebook and YouTube over Twitter in particular were threefold. First, due to relative numbers of users, Facebook was considered a more significant channel. In 2014, Facebook had 1.2 billion users compared to Twitter's 271 million (McCarthy, 2014). By December 2015, Facebook had surpassed 1.5 billion users; by March 2016, Twitter had only 320 million users (Adweek, 2016). Similarly, YouTube maintains a significantly higher user base than Twitter, with 1.9 billion active monthly users in 2018 compared to Twitter's 336

million (Kallas, 2018). Second, Twitter's algorithm is and was considerably less sophisticated than Facebook's, with Twitter's timeline ordering tweets in simple reverse-chronological order until 2015. Finally, Facebook presented more manageable datasets. Twitter's 'retweet' function, character limit, chronological timeline and intimacy between accounts and followers, meant that the platform incentivised (before the algorithm change in 2015 to introduce 'ranked tweets' and 'in case you missed it') a high rate of output. Moreover, Twitter retweets potentially created an issue of coding, given that retweeting does not necessarily suggest endorsement. Facebook, on the other hand, given its relative algorithmic sophistication, lends itself to quality posts rather than quantity, which created a more manageable yet still relevant and insightful corpus.

To set further parameters on the dataset, both quantitative and qualitative research into both groups ran until the end of 2016. 2016 presented an optimal point for both academic and practical purposes. From an academic perspective, researching social media content until 2016 included significant political events in the UK that were particularly meaningful for both groups, including the 2014 European elections, the 2015 general election, the 2016 London mayoral election and 2016 EU referendum. From a practical perspective, 2016 also provided a defined break point that also allowed enough time to subject the corpus to comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis.

To efficiently collect, categorise and analyse the dataset, techniques from computational social science were used. Computational social science refers to the use of computer programming tools as research methods to answer social science questions (Freelon, 2018b). Some techniques of social media extraction include scraping and data mining. Scraping is a term used to describe methods that use software to simulate human web use to collect specific pieces of information; data mining is the process of extracting patterns from large datasets to transform them into comprehensible structures for further analysis and evaluation.

Scraping and data mining are methods that are widely used in other contexts, such as marketing and e-commerce, to monitor the activity of competitors, pre-empt aggregated customer issues, and conduct sentiment analysis into public perception of company branding and service, and are services offered by numerous tech start-ups to companies in these industries (Koshy, 2016). As such, these techniques can be readily redeployed for academic purposes.

Overall, these tools confer several advantages to researchers than would be available otherwise (Freelon, 2018b). First, it allows researchers to investigate behaviour unobtrusively. Social media data in particular has allowed researchers to obtain new measures and metrics of human behaviour, such as desirability. As has been noted in several studies, such as with voting intention, what respondents to polls and surveys say and what these respondents then do are often different. Computational social science allows to researchers to unobtrusively measure what these people do and compare to other datasets such as surveys. Second, these tools allow researchers to run large scale experiments easily across large geographical regions. Third, and most pertinently, these tools allow researchers to process large datasets. As an additional point, Freelon notes that, increasingly, social media has also become the venue for various political actions, such as political discourse, communication, fandom and protest, analogous to pre-digital research into important speeches or new social movements (2018b).

Even as certain contributors to the wider debate assert revolutionary and emancipatory effects of social media, so to have similar contributors asserted the revolutionary effect of internet technologies for academic research. Measured considerations of the effects on research include more efficient and economic research, less sampling bias, higher performance for large datasets, and a capacity to collect metadata, as well as through identifying and interacting with study participants, monitoring parties of interest, or to supplement or as a proxy for survey data (Jürgens, 2012; Murphy *et al.*, 2014: 792). Other more quixotic contributors, such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, have predicted revolutionary outcomes that could be

gleaned from social media scraping and data mining, from modelling “sociological laws of human behaviour” to “[predicting] political crises, revolutions and other forms of social and economic instability” (Marres and Weltevrede, 2013: 314). Whilst these outcomes are yet to materialise, it is undoubtable that cyber-enabled research techniques have rewritten the research playbook in a variety of fields, including political science, allowing data gathering, manipulation and visualisation.

However, there are several drawbacks. Most significantly, it has been noted that social media lacks representativeness, even in countries or regions, such as the UK or in London, where internet and social media penetration is high. First, this is due to the opt-in nature of political engagement online; increasingly, given Facebook’s recent shift away from political content, it appears that many people are opting out (Freelon, 2018b). Second, social media sites are often sites of performativity, conveying to audiences (including researchers) what users want others to see rather than what is truly reflective. Third, certain metrics are often imperfect or unreliable. Social listening software, for example, offers sentiment analysis to brands as part of its functionality. However, functions like this have proven difficult to actualise using computational techniques despite being a relatively straightforward query to articulate to other humans. As a result, this research has avoided sentiment analysis (by avoiding overemphasising Facebook ‘likes’ for instance)<sup>3</sup> or follower profiling to avoid these issues altogether.

Quantitative analysis was based on big data extracted from each group’s official public social media pages through bespoke web scraping tools. Noortje Marres and Esther Weltevrede describe scraping not only as a “technique for data collection”, but also as a technique of data analysis and “analytic practice”, given that scrapers do not extract data indiscriminately but

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions to this exist, however, such as in cases where these might signpost other areas of interest. This might include the response of algorithmic arrangements to either group’s content or the exposure of said content altogether.

rather according to particular parameters defined by the researcher (2013: 316-7). The tool's essential function was to access publicly available (but unstructured) data from each page and transform it into a structured and efficiently summarised dataset in spreadsheet format for any spreadsheet application (such as Excel or Apple's Numbers). Though most programming languages can perform web scraping, this study used Python. Python was chosen because of its designed ease of use, underpinned by its readability, accessibility and intuitive design (Saxton, 2014). Furthermore, its general purpose usage (broad applicability across application domains) has led to its use in numerous contexts, including at the back end of many social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Reddit. Finally, Python has been open source since it was created in the 1980s, making it freely usable and distributable, even for commercial use. These reasons have contributed to the large, active user community that Python enjoys, creating a wealth of resources to draw from both in writing and troubleshooting code, even in the context of social science research. Academics such as Gregory D. Saxton, Welai Wayne Xu and the CuriosityBits Collective, Richard N. Landers and Michelle A. MacSweeney have all contributed through computational social science to the academic utility of Python.

Scraping social media content was much more manageable than manual collection. Each scrape took between ten minutes and half an hour (depending on the focus) to collect and archive data and metadata for all content posted, made publicly available and accessible at the time of the scrape to the page's creation (or otherwise specified limit). The particular code used in this study produced the information into comma-separated values file, which allowed information to be filtered, searched for and graphically visualised easily. The database stored data and metadata from each page's content, so that even if a post was subsequently deleted or removed, key information was archived. Key metrics of engagement, such as shares, comments and reactions, were also recorded, that facilitated ordering by rates of engagement to identify popular or relevant posts for qualitative analysis.

## **Research methods**

The structure of this thesis was subsequently influenced by the mixed-methods approach. First, as per the critical approach, historical research was undertaken to contextualise UKIP and Britain First against both the broader history of British radical right groups and their own immediate history. Subsequently, each case study was examined, focusing on each case in turn. First, comprehensive quantitative research was undertaken, followed by the qualitative research. This structure was chosen so as to comprehensively examine each group's social media strategy in turn, to contrast one against the other.

### **- Quantitative research**

For the quantitative research, this study used methods similar to those advocated by Benjamin J. Lee and Mark Littler in their comparable analysis of the BNP's social media channels (2015). Executing a bespoke Python code written for this study, the official Facebook pages of Britain First and UKIP were scraped until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016. The information gathered included the post data (i.e., the post text itself) and metadata, including url, description, type and engagement metrics (shares, comments and total and specific reactions). As with Lee and Littler's study, data was gathered continually into 2017 to allow engagements to accumulate (2015: 23). Moreover, images, videos and links that were reused, reposted or shared several times were counted again as often the accompanying text was tweaked to contextualise the post in a different manner to realistically capture the amount that both groups

were posting in the selected timespan and because these posts also accumulated their own engagements.

Facebook page data, which was, by a considerable margin, the most numerous, was accessed through the site's application programming interface (API). The API is code that allows two software components to communicate with one other to request and access data directly by transferring requests and responses between them. As Bodgan Batrinca and Philip C. Treleaven have noted, "the most useful sources of social media data are those that provide programmable access via APIs" (2014). Accessing social media data through APIs is what Deen Freelon refers to as a 'sanctioned' method of social media data collection. Sanctioned methods, such as API extraction or requested or purchased data, are official methods of data collection (Freelon, 2018b). Not all sanctioned methods are equally useful; purchased or requested data bundles, for example, might often provide more limited datasets than extracted data.

However, most social media platforms have started to make it increasingly difficult for researchers to obtain comprehensive access to raw data due to the commercial value of user data (Batrinca and Treleaven, 2014; Felt, 2016: 2). Twitter's Search and Streaming APIs, for instance, allow researchers to access tweets from publicly accessible profiles (over 90% of all profiles) by several categories, including by keyword (including hashtag), user, geographic location or random sampling (Batrinca and Treleaven, 2014). Indeed, Twitter announced the Twitter Data Grants program in 2014, which has allowed researchers to apply for access to Twitter's public tweets and collected data (Batrinca and Treleaven, 2014). Accessing social media data through Facebook, however, at the time of study was more complex, requiring open authorisation status from the user, the unique ID of the target object, and an app access token (which may also expire); however, the Facebook Graph API could also handle a broad range of query parameters, including posts, users, pages, events, groups, places, check-ins and



locations (Batrinsa and Treleaven, 2014). Within the context of the case studies, the data to be collected and page ID was, by its nature as official public spaces for these groups, publicly available, and access tokens for data easy to obtain.

Unfortunately, in April 2018 (after this project's own data extraction took place), Facebook shut down access to its API<sup>4</sup>. Ostensibly, this appears to be in direct response to the 2018 Cambridge Analytica data scandal, whereby the collection of personal data of at least 87 million people was allegedly used in digital political campaigning to influence voter behaviour and turnout on behalf of political campaigns including the EU Referendum 'Leave' campaign and Trump presidential campaign (Solon, 2018). Whilst Facebook admittedly has been increasingly transparent in some areas, such as making increasing amounts of data available to academics studying the effects of targeted political advertising (Anstead, 2018), in other ways it has become increasingly opaque. Commenting on technical updates in wake of the scandal, Mike Schroepfer, Facebook's Chief Technology Officer who would eventually give evidence to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, would assert that "[Facebook believes] these changes will better protect people's information while still enabling developers to create useful experiences" (2018). In reality, this clamp-down has only significantly affected academics and researchers; market researchers and commercial groups appear to have maintained access to Facebook's API. Currently, there is no independent method to extract Facebook data directly from source without violating Facebook's terms of service (Freelon, 2018a). The outcome of this development has been to increasingly drive researchers towards 'unsanctioned' methods of collection (Freelon, 2018b). Unsanctioned methods, such as scraping directly from the web page without access to the API, may present certain potential legal and financial risks for even small-scale terms of service violations (Freelon, 2018a; 2018b).

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<sup>4</sup> Twitter's API, at the time of writing, is still accessible.

In the extraction process, this study executed each scrape using a version of Python 2 (specifically, Python 2.7.6) through the Mac OS X Terminal program<sup>5</sup>. To authenticate the code to access data from Facebook's API, an access token was obtained. An access token without expiration time was utilised by creating a Facebook for Developers account<sup>6</sup>, adding a new app and using the numerical app ID and secret (with the token being *ID|secret*). Otherwise, a temporary access token can be obtained<sup>7</sup> and used in the same way assuming the Python script is run before expiration. Finally, the target page's correct page name was noted from the page's URL address<sup>8</sup>. The scrape was then executed through Terminal and the access token and ID were inputted directly when prompted by the script.

Following the scrape, data was automatically gathered and categorised in the database. The corpus was broken down in several ways so as to better analyse the dataset. Data was categorised by data published, number of engagements, and primary medium, such as whether the post contained an image, video, link, status or event. Each piece of data was then examined in closer detail. Notes were kept on the ideological message of each post and the primary way the message was delivered, such as if a post used a variety or mixture of mediums, whether the image, link or the accompanying status text was the primary method. These trends were examined over time and linked to key moments in British politics to see if these trends changed over time to reflect changing strategies, such as uses of the platform, ways of delivering messages and political opportunism in wake of these key events.

## - Qualitative research

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<sup>5</sup> Python 2 and the Terminal come pre-installed on Mac OS X and most Linux systems. For Windows systems, Python 2 can be downloaded for free and run in Windows PowerShell with little difference in execution.

<sup>6</sup> Found at [developers.facebook.com/apps](https://developers.facebook.com/apps).

<sup>7</sup> Found at [developers.facebook.com/tools/explorer](https://developers.facebook.com/tools/explorer).

<sup>8</sup> This is because the page's correct name can often differ from the display name. Otherwise, the numerical page ID can be obtained from free online converters. Conversely, to scrape public Facebook groups, only the numerical ID was accepted, obtained by viewing the source code.

For the qualitative research, this study followed the precedence set by seminal studies into radical right discourses from the past decade. Primarily, these studies have used the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA, developed by Teun Van Dijk and promoted by scholars such as Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough, can broadly be described as an interdisciplinary research programme for the study of discourse with a specific interest in “power, injustice and political-economic, social or cultural change in our globalised and globalising world and societies” (Wodak, 2013). Recently, academics such as Fairclough have recently advocated a shift in CDA’s analytical focus away from critique of established systems, structures and logics of society to the understanding of strategies proliferated in response to crises and events (2013: 17-8).

CDA incorporates numerous methods, procedures and approaches to the study of discourse. Bloor and Bloor describe discourse as a “phenomena of symbolic interaction and communication between people, usually through spoken or written language or visual representation” (2007: 6). Discourses produce texts, which are typically used to describe a discursive event. Beaugrande and Dressler posit seven standards that categorise a meaningful text: cohesion, coherence, acceptability (appropriateness within the cultural/historical setting), intentionality (the producers’ purpose), informativity, situationality (relevance to the situation) and intertextuality (reliance on previous texts for form and reference) (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 7). Textual analysis incorporates two complementary forms of analysis: linguistic and intertextual (Fairclough, 2013: 188). Linguistic analysis covers traditional methods of textual analysis, such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar, semantics and textual organisation. Intertextual analysis, on the other hand, considers the dependence of texts on history, culture, politics and society, how texts dialectically and dynamically transform social and historical resources and how they re-accentuate genres.

From the work of Wodak in particular, three clear advantages of CDA are distinguished with respect to this study. The first advantage is that CDA dovetails appropriately with the emphasis on a critical approach to social media. Following the analytical blueprints of advocates of CDA therefore harmonises methodological considerations with the overarching theoretical framework. The second advantage pertains to the radical right components of this study. Through its emphasis on ideology, power and inequality, particularly within the context of globalisation, CDA lends itself to the study of discourses that are contextualised in both a narrative and meta-narrative sense by these same considerations both implicitly or explicitly. Finally, Wodak asserts that CDA has particular relevance to the study of discursive impacts of new media technologies (2013: 15). Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, for instance, provides a method for analysing visual mediums of communication; Lemke, meanwhile, has emphasised the value of multimedia semiotics and hypertexts (and more) in multimodal contexts such as new media (Wodak, 2013: 19). The interest in explaining new phenomena and examining new global tendencies makes these analytical frameworks (and CDA more broadly) particularly applicable to this study's qualitative aspects.

Alongside Wodak, Jon E. Richardson has been a key proponent of Critical Discourse Analysis in the study of radical right discourses. Pertinently, Richardson drew on Critical Discourse Analysis in his comparative study of BNP and Labour Party 2006 local election materials with respect to discursive constructions of race and class (2008). Richardson and Wodak also applied the Discursive-Historical Approach to CDA in their examination of BNP and Alliance for the Future of Austria party election materials (2009). Whilst not explicitly following a CDA framework, George Kassimeris and Leonie Jackson have studied ideology on the *EDL News* website through a critical lens, which problematised the English Defence League's claim to be anti-racist as it proliferated racialising and Islamophobic narratives online through discourse analysis (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015). Following this trend, Robin

Engström utilised an integrated cognitive-historical framework combining components of the Discursive-Historical Approach and concepts of Cognitive Linguistics in his study of the BNP’s visual social media content (2014). In his study, Engström formulates four guiding dimensions to structure analysis. The first dimension was the *constitution*, defined as the relation between text and its constituent parts. The second dimension was the *function* of content, which, pertained to the purpose of the text and its parts. Engström’s third dimension, *agency*, interrogated how and why the text exists. The final dimension was *similarity*, or the relation to other texts (2014: 5). These studies, and Engström’s four dimensions of analysis for radical right social media content in particular, have provided guiding principles for the qualitative research of this study.

## **Ethical considerations**

The most pertinent ethical consideration for this study undoubtedly regards the collection and handling of personal data. As Murphy *et al.* note, “regulation of new technologies can be a slow process”, particularly regarding legal and ethical considerations for research (2014: 792). However, in a post-Cambridge Analytica landscape, particularly careful ethical considerations are necessary to protect the public from malevolent actors, safeguard the integrity of the academic community and rebuild trust in researchers undertaking computational techniques within political academia. New data protection regimes, incorporating the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, have already explained liabilities for organisations through the seven principles of processing data (including lawfulness, fairness and transparency, limitations on purpose, data collection and storage, accuracy, security and accountability), individual rights (including the

right to be informed and to object, of access, of rectification and erasure) and comprehensively defining terms such as personal and sensitive data. As recently as July 2018, the DCMS Select Committee have also urged the UK Government to make technology companies more responsible and liable for content published to their platforms and called for the establishment of a Digital Atlantic Charter to establish a formal, albeit voluntary, basis of collaboration for alignment of liabilities and protections for social media companies and their users (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018). This framework provides the foundation to ensure that the research presented here adheres to the highest standards of ethical regulation.

The aspect of the study that this new regime was most applicable for was the collection of and quantitative research into social media data. Murphy *et al.* have previously argued that “[p]ublic spaces can be likened to observing behavior in public”, and so “no consent should be necessary to conduct research on publicly available information” (2014: 792). However, Freelon notes that researchers should “not confuse TOS compliance with human subjects compliance or privacy protection” (2018a: 4). Terms of service are created to protect the business interests of the company in question; this does not necessarily explicitly incorporate the interests of users. This includes protecting and respecting the rights and wishes of host platforms for (rather than the producers of) content. As such, data was only collected from official public social media pages for the parties themselves. No data was collected from personal social media accounts, even when these were public or were of prominent members or leaders of either group, including fan pages. No attempt was made to collect information from private and/or dark social media channels, such as closed Facebook groups, Facebook chats, direct messages, or any other similar form of communication.

Avoiding personal data collection included collecting or attributing comments, likes, shares, or any of the myriad that individuals may have engaged or otherwise participated in certain functions of any platform without fully understanding who might be able to view their

posts, activity or associations. Moreover, individuals may remove their content from the public domain at a later stage (such as ‘unliking’ a page or post or deleting their profile), making the issue simultaneously an issue of ethics, practicality and academic rigor (Jürgens, 2012). Furthermore, given that there are no regulations as to the accuracy of a user profile, it may be impossible to judge an individual’s age or otherwise legal capacity to consent (Beninger *et al.*, 2014). To protect the privacy of individuals, names and pictures of people not directly associated with either group have been removed from the dataset. The only exception to this has been the names of individuals in leadership positions in either group or from related political groups or media. These individuals often appear in promotional materials and have featured prominently in traditional media, and their association with the group is widely known.

Finally, data collection was undertaken by entirely sanctioned and authorised means, aligned with recommendations given by Freelon (2018a). Data was collected by API extraction (at the latest) early in 2017, well before Facebook removed public access to its API and amended its terms of service. No attempt at computational data collection was subsequently attempted. Extreme cases, which, despite being outliers, have occurred due to unintentional violations of service (such as the case of Aaron Swartz), attest to the risks to and consequences for researchers themselves when faced with the consequences of violating companies’ TOS (Freelon, 2018a: 4-5).

## **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the approach, methods and key considerations undertaken to conduct the research. This study shall utilise a mixed methods

approach combining qualitative and quantitative research. From a research perspective, this provides both breadth and depth in answering how and why radical right groups use social media. In order to overcome the challenge of collecting and analysing such a large quantity of data, this study utilised bespoke Python code to extract data from Facebook's API and categorise information into a manageable corpus. This research method subsequently allowed analysis of trends in the subject of propaganda materials, rates of message mediums used and overall quantity of output over time. For the qualitative dimension, research followed the lead from several other analyses of radical right propaganda, using methods within Critical Discourse Analysis.



## Chapter 4

### History of the British Radical Right

#### Introduction

The utility of social media for any group must be considered within the political context it is used. Britain has often been conceptualised by its ‘exceptionalism’ to radical right emergence relative to the West. Recent scholarship has aimed to redress this, however, and sheds light on the backdrop against which UKIP and Britain First have gained prominence. First, the Edwardian and interwar origins of the radical right shall be discussed. Next, this chapter shall discuss the ‘three waves’ of radical right support in Europe delineated by academics. The first wave was constituted of remnants of post-war fascist sympathisers. The second comprised a subsequent generation of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist movements. The third has been characterised by a splintered milieu of radical populist parties. Alongside these descriptions, a broader discussion will be undertaken on the concept of British exceptionalism relative to the broader European experience.

#### Origins

Traditionally, the tendency in academic literature has been to understand the origins of the UK radical right by applying conclusions drawn from contemporary European experiences. On the continent, the pre-war radical right revolt was driven by reactionary, anti-modernising agrarian elites and augmented by *petit bourgeois* and peasant strata (Thurlow, 1987: 2-3). Britain, meanwhile, was typically assumed to be undergoing a period of relative economic and

social stability. This conception was challenged by academics such as Richard Thurlow and Geoffrey Searle, who reconsidered the UK radical right and British fascism as distinctly Edwardian in origin (Baker, 1996: 14). Rather, Britain itself underwent a revolt on the right prompted by reactionary ‘Die-hard’ Unionist Lords (characterised by their opposition to the 1911 Parliament Act<sup>9</sup>) and the imperialist ‘Milnerite’ Round Table Group. These ‘Die-hards’ formed the emerging radical right movement’s most important elements, broadly unified by common ideas and disaffected as they were from moderate party politics and orthodox parliamentary democracy (Baker, 1996: 15-16). The movement was also at least as active in its criticism of Asquith’s Liberal government as its later opposition to Bolshevism and communism (Baker, 1996: 17).

These common ideas were beyond simple agrarian, anti-modern concerns. Indeed, many of the landed aristocracy had already diversified profitably into industrial projects. Rather, the foremost concern was sharply-declining British *Realpolitik* precipitated by the economic and military ascension of the United States and Germany (Thurlow, 1987: 8-10). They also supported “tariff reform, compulsory military service, an expansion of the army and navy, the development of social welfare, ... an end to ‘alien’ immigration and armed resistance to Home Rule in Ireland” (Thurlow, 1987: 4), many ideas of which still continue through to the present. Moreover, this emergent radical faction promoted some modernising ideologies whilst simultaneously rejecting others, and advocated ultranationalism, extreme authoritarianism and intense militarism as much as anti-liberalism, anti-urbanism and anti-capitalism (Thurlow, 1987: 9; Linehan, 2000: 7-9).

In terms of *Realpolitik*, defending British imperial interests from its rivals took precedent. The most significant pressure groups reflecting Die-hards political interests

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<sup>9</sup> The Act abolished the House of Lords’ veto over finance bills, limited veto power over other bills and hinted at further Lords reform and Irish self-governance.

included the Tariff Reform League, Navy League and National Maritime League, motivated in response to German imperial aggression (Baker, 1996: 16). However, elements of the radical right were also involved in conspiratorial anti-alien and anti-Semitic campaign groups, such as the Parliamentary Alien Immigration Committee, British Brothers League, London League and Immigration Reform Association (Thurlow, 1987: 11).

These aspects would directly influence British fascism that arose in the interwar period. More pertinently, however, was the radicalising influence of the war itself. Given its status as a victorious post-war power, the conditions that allowed fascism to emerge in Germany and Italy were not initially present in Britain. However, the failure of successive Liberal, Conservative and Labour governments in the 1920s to create a society many thought as compensatory for the trauma of the trenches increasingly frustrated and alienated many returning soldiers, similar to the rise of communism and pacifism in interwar France (Thurlow, 1987: 15-6). Indeed, three key members of the interwar British fascist movement, Sir Oswald Mosley, A. K. Chesterton and Henry Williamson, were all affected by their experiences in the First World War. Mosley's aims, as Thurlow elucidates, were to create a "better world" for those who returned home and to ensure it was never repeated to honour the sacrifice of those who did not (1987: 17). Similarly, Williamson and Chesterton gravitated towards fascism following their own disillusionment with British political tradition, alienation from peacetime civilian life and a desire to facilitate a self-improvement of the masses.

However, like the Edwardian radical right, this "better world" was caveated by openly-expressed anti-Semitism and 'racial purity'. The British Union of Fascists was established due to Mosley's inability to spark radical change in British politics from within following the dismal electoral showing of his New Party in 1931, as well as his disillusionment with economic conservatism of the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties, despite his successful political career prior to 1931 (Lebzelter, 1978; Thurlow, 1987: 17). Instead, Mosley aimed to

mobilise the masses and revolutionise the system from without, drawing membership and structure from the New Party youth movement and the defunct British Fascists group, as well as other self-styled ‘Jew Wise’ proto-fascist groups (Thurlow, 1987: 61; Baker, 1996: 19).

Politically, the BUF drew direct inspiration from the fascist movements of Italy as well as building on the militaristic, traditionalist aspects of the Edwardian radical right. However, support of the BUF peaked at about 50,000 following (brief) support from the *Daily Mail* in 1934 (Eatwell, 2003: 172; Goodwin, 2010: 20). Typically, however, consistent support ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 activists (Eatwell, 2003: 172). Other groups, such as the British Fascisti, National Fascisti, Nordic League, Britons Society and Fascist League, failed even to match the paltry numbers of the BUF (Goodwin, 2010: 20). Largely, the BUF was considered little more than a nuisance by the general public, and its impotence was compounded by direct action from anti-fascist groups, who disrupted fascist and anti-Semitic marches such as at the infamous Battle of Cable Street in 1936. Moreover, the movement was strongly associated with resorting to political violence, despite protests from Mosley and its members (Cullen, 1993). The BUF also received direct and indirect pressure from the state, including political surveillance by the uniformed police and security services, banning of political uniforms through the Public Order Act 1936 and the removal of any public platform to widely disseminate their discourses (Thurlow, 1996: 49-50; Poole, 1996: 62).

With the outbreak of war, the BUF briefly saw an increase in membership in 1939 as the ‘patriotic opposition’ to war and to anti-appeaser Conservatives in particular. The movement increasingly attracted more “middle-class ‘Tories’ alienated from their ‘natural’ party”, with membership initially exceeding 10,000 and later approaching 20,000 (Webber, 1984). However, in 1940, the BUF was banned outright by the Government and Mosley was placed in internment, effectively ending the threat of British fascists as wartime political actors.

## **The ‘three waves’ theory**

European radical right emergence traces three 'waves' of far-right breakthroughs in support in the modern era (Mudde, 2000: 5). The three waves were first conceptualised in the late 1980s by Klaus von Beyme. von Beyme described what he termed as three “growth-waves of right-wing movements” across European countries that he observed in statistical data comprised from voter share for right-wing extremist parties (1988: 7). Conceptually, there is broad academic consensus of the characteristics, junctures and circumstances of each wave. The first two waves in particular have been defined by the emergence, apparent breakthrough and eventual receding of groups across the West embracing similar ideological perspectives. Furthermore, each wave can be roughly characterised as genealogically related and/or influenced by the activism and politics of the preceding waves, either through direct ideological influences and the return of prominent radical right activists, or by consciously distancing and defining themselves from and against them.

In his analysis, von Beyme considered the first phase to be a post-war nostalgic re-emergence of interwar fascist followers finding themselves in an underprivileged situation against the backdrop of European ‘defascistisation’ (1988: 8). The second and third phases, in contrast, which occurred in the 1950s to 1960s and then from the 1980s onwards respectively, were thought to have emerged from ‘new waves of social deprivation’. Specifically, these waves exploited contemporary social and economic upheaval and increasing pressure caused by anti-tax sentiment, unemployment and xenophobia (1988: 10-11).

### **- The first wave**

The first wave of radical right emergence within the post-war European landscape occurred somewhat contemporaneously across countries such as Austria, France and Greece (Ellinas, 2010: 13). In Britain, however, there was little support for radical right movements during the first wave. However, despite the BUF's growth in late 1939, there was no strong mainstream interwar fascist movement or regime to draw latent post-war support from. Oswald Mosley attempted to reboot the BUF following the war with the Union Movement, but only contested two elections and managed a paltry 2,800 and 4,075 votes respectively. Without a strong base, the first wave had little political impact in Britain. As such, there was little contemporary academic interest into the UK radical right at the time. Cas Mudde notes that the initial phase of academic literature instead originated most notably in French and German scholarship (2016).

Largely, the failure of the first wave has been attributed two major reasons. Foremost, the British public had just experienced first-hand significant and enduring personal hardship, suffering emotional and economic loss on the battlefield, at home during the blitz and during the post-war period of austerity, caused by the fascist and Nazi regimes of central Europe. That said, Britain's experience of the devastation of the Second World War was by no means unique. Moreover, increasing reports of Nazi war crimes from across Europe hardened attitudes against overt fascists further. As such, there was little popular political platform for British fascists to seriously threaten to break into the British political mainstream. The Union Movement, a first-wave British far-right party founded in 1948 by Oswald Mosley, instead tried to define itself as anti-USSR and as part of a European nationalist movement instead. Fundamentally, however, it could not disassociate itself from its fascist roots and was condemned by the deep impression left by fascism on the post-war British psyche (Poole, 1996: 68).

#### **- The second wave**

According to academic literature, the ‘second wave’ did not emerge concurrently across Europe as the first wave did and represented a much broader, more diverse manifestation of radical right politics (Ellinas, 2010: 13). For von Beyme, the second wave was predominantly a French, rather than pan-European, phenomenon, following the eight-month tenure of Radical Party politician Pierre Mendès France as President of the Council of Ministers between June 1954 and February 1955. As such, it was against the backdrop of a waning European second wave that the National Front emerged in the UK in 1967. Similar to the first wave, academic consensus opines that the second wave was a relative political failure in Britain, achieving neither political success or popular support. Indeed, National Front membership peaked in 1972 with 14,000 members, only slightly higher than the average membership of the BUF and significantly less than the BUF at its peak<sup>10</sup> (Eatwell, 2000: 172).

This new UK radical right found some relevance away from ‘Mosleyite’ Italian-inspired British fascism, favouring an introspective racial populism with underlying neo-Nazi sympathies. Specifically, these movements embraced radical xenophobia, underpinned by biological racism and anti-Semitism, and were hostile to liberal democracy (Goodwin, 2010: 25). However, the emergence of anti-Nazism as a British cultural value (at least superficially) meant this approach was inherently limited. Though the NF in particular attempted to downplay associations with fascism and Nazism, its continued association with radical, politically active ‘young nationals’ who rose to prominence in the early 1960s and past neo-Nazi affiliations of its leadership allowed anti-fascist activists to continue to label them as such (Thurlow, 1987: 247-8). Indeed, scholars such as Eatwell, Roxborough and Griffin have highlighted the negative effect of John Tyndall’s leadership in particular regarding his overt neo-Nazi ideology

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<sup>10</sup> This peak interestingly came at a time when the NF’s European counterparts were actually showing poorly at elections across Europe (Eatwell, 2000: 172).

and later transparent attempts to disguise his anti-Semitism (Eatwell, 1996; Eatwell, 2000; Roxborough, 2002; Goodwin, 2011).

It was during the second wave that many prominent authors and seminal works of academic literature arose. Most scholarship in this phase was historical in nature and was typically descriptive. It was not until the subsequent phase of literature (1980-2000), coinciding with the third wave of radical right emergence, that scholarship increasingly incorporated contributions and analytical dimensions from social science (Mudde, 2016; 2017). Social science literature examining the second wave in particular emphasised a demand-side, macro-political analysis of radical right emergence. Scholars initially postulated that the UK political system, socio-political and cultural context and the prevalence of the mainstream political parties stunted the growth of radical right groups during this time. The first-past-the-post elections in particular has often been cited as the major difficulty for marginal parties to enter government other than at the local level or European level or by concentrating locally (Eatwell, 1996: 101; Eatwell, 2000: 188). Moreover, activities of state policing and intelligence agencies, particularly under the Public Order Act (1936) and Race Relations Act (1968), suppressed any overt political organisation or demonstration to blatantly incite racial hatred (Thurlow, 1987: 256-7; Eatwell, 1996: 101). Similarly, the UK cultural context has been conceptualised as inherently hostile to radical right parties. Beyond valuing anti-fascism, other aspects included enduring loyalty to mainstream political parties due to their strong ideological identities, discriminatory policies (which diffused the appeal of the NF's racial populism), and active attempts to own the immigration debate and bring sympathisers back into the fold (Eatwell, 1996: 101; Eatwell, 2000: 180-1, 187-8).

However, by emphasising systemic and cultural explanations, academics have consistently underplayed the direct failures of the National Front leadership in their own lack of electoral success. As Eatwell notes, there is some evidence to suggest that, had the National



Front been able to distance itself fully from the fascist label and had charismatic, tactically astute leadership to prevent schisms and avoid tactical blunders, the movement may have been able to achieve a comparable breakthrough to their European counterparts. Evidence suggests that many supported radical right policies at the time (Eatwell, 1996: 101-2). Roger Eatwell describes this concept as ‘British exceptionalism’ to the broader Western/European experience. Notions of British exceptionalism have consistently affirmed that the British experience of far-right politics has had some inherent “essential marginality” when compared to other Western radical right movements (Eatwell: 2000: 172-3). Notably, notions of British exceptionalism largely ignore similar observations of far-right marginality in European countries such as the Netherlands and elsewhere during this time (Mudde and Van Holsteyn, 2000: 159-162). Regardless, the concept of British exceptionalism would face significant challenges with the advent of the third wave.

#### **- The third wave**

Academic consensus states that the third wave began in the late 1980s with the resurgence of radical right groups across Continental Europe. Undoubtedly, the third wave has proven more enduring than the previous phases of emergence (Ellinas, 2010: 81). As with the second wave, the third wave has similarly provoked increased academic attention on the radical right since the 1990s (Mudde, 2000: 6; de Lange, 2007: 411). Hans-Georg Betz characterises successful third wave movements as “radical right-wing populist parties” who have successfully distanced themselves “from the backward-looking, reactionary politics of the traditional [extremist right] as well as its proclivity for violence” (Betz, 1994: 3-4). Betz has argued that sustained growth in popular support and political, media and academic interest

were fostered by the transition “from industrial welfare capitalism to post-industrial individualised capitalism” and the adoption of neoliberal economic policy (Betz, 1994: 170).

Based on the third wave’s growth, academics increasingly began to question assumptions of second-wave literature that macropolitical structures and socio-political factors were definitive barriers to political success for the UK radical right, instead looking at ‘supply-side’ factors for radical right emergence. Nigel Copsey notes that a “significant minority of British voters” held anti-immigrant and authoritarian beliefs, for instance, but lacked a credible populist party to vote for (2011: 2). British Crime Survey statistics for the 1990s, for example, estimated that there were on average over 100,000 racially motivated incidents (including verbal abuse) per year (Eatwell, 2000: 174). Similarly, an ICM poll published by the *Daily Express* indicated that nine percent of respondents “would vote” for a British party with policies echoing the French *Front National* and a further seventeen percent “would seriously consider doing so”, without further taking into account “the appeal of a charismatic leader like Le Pen” or that “polls typically underestimate the support for extremist parties” (Eatwell, 2000: 186). Finally, based on opinion poll data, a significant minority of Britons stated that they felt threatened by multiculturalism in Britain (Copsey, 2011: 4). Eatwell concedes that, despite the crudeness and limited validity of these proxy variables, it suggested an underlying and untapped source of support for a party that sought political success based on these platforms.

The emergence of the British National Party in the mid-90s became the paradigm for the British third wave radical right. Though the BNP never seriously threatened national political success, its victories at the margins undermined any remaining case for British exceptionalism (Copsey, 2011: 2). Notably, in 1993, the BNP achieved a minority vote local by-election victory in the Isle of Dogs in southeast London (Eatwell, 2003: 172). The early BNP, under Tyndall, did not downplay the biological racism and anti-Semite aspects of their ideology, and thus did not enjoy similar levels of success at the beginning of the third wave.

However, increasingly, a number of members agitated for modernisation and detoxification of the party. From 1999, under the leadership of Nick Griffin, the BNP sought to reinvent itself by taking on a more populist ideological outlook (Copsey, 2011: 6; Goodwin, 2011: 38-9, 46-50, 67). First, the party ditched the biological racism and reconfigured itself instead towards an ‘ethno-nationalist xenophobia’ that aimed to rally immigration sceptics and mobilise anti-Muslim sentiment in local communities (Goodwin, 2011: 67-8). Similarly, Griffin sought to downplay the prominence of other extreme aspects of the BNP’s ideology under Tyndall, such as by distancing the party from the homophobia during his infamous 2009 *Question Time* appearance (Severs, 2017). Second, the party shed its anti-democratic roots for an anti-establishment stance and attempted to present itself as a viable alternative to political mainstream parties for politically dissatisfied, disenfranchised, and otherwise ‘left-behind’ voters (Goodwin, 2011: 69-70). Third, the BNP distanced itself from street protests and marches that had characterised radical right movements since the British fascists and instead embraced community-based activism that focused esoteric local issues, particularly in areas that were traditionally Labour-voting (Goodwin, 2011: 71; Dinas *et al.*, 2013). In several areas, activists cleaned play areas and estates tagged with graffiti, campaigned to save local services and targeted local fears such as speeding on housing estates and older residents’ fears of gangs and gang-related crime (Goodwin, 2011; Trilling, 2012). Simultaneously, apathy amongst the British electorate in general continually eroded voter turnout, overemphasising the power of voters who rejected the two major political parties.

Subsequently, the BNP achieved a number of modest electoral successes. The party won thirteen council seats in 2003 and held fifty-four to fifty-five between 2006 and 2008 across twenty-two authorities, though this number had fallen back to twenty-eight by 2010 (Copsey, 2011: 5-6). In 2008, it won a seat on the Greater London Assembly and won three seats on country councils in 2009 (Copsey, 2011: 6). Most significantly, in 2009 two BNP

candidates were elected to the European Parliament with almost a million votes and a 6.2 percent voter share (Copsey, 2011: 1; see also Goodwin, 2009).

In 2009, the UK also saw the emergence of the English Defence League. Unlike the BNP, the EDL did not require activists to undergo recruitment procedures or join official membership lists; rather, (uniquely at the time) most activity was undertaken online (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 3). In the space vacated by the BNP as they targeted electoral success, the EDL began to stage confrontational marches and mobilise opposition to perceived threats to Britain posed by Islam, immigration and multiculturalism (Cutts and Goodwin, 2014: 98; Bartlett and Littler, 2011, 6). Between 2009 and 2011, the EDL had conducted over fifty demonstrations across England (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 10). Indeed, the EDL also challenged myths held about radical right supporters: of almost 1,300 affiliates surveyed online, a Demos study found that only twenty-eight percent claimed that they were over 30, thirty percent were educated to university or college level and fifteen percent possessed a professional qualification (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 6).

From 2010 onwards, BNP membership began to decline. Eventually, the party collapsed financially and politically and more or less disappeared from British politics (Margetts, 2016). In 2013, EDL founder Stephen Lennon, known as Tommy Robinson, left the movement (Lusher, 2017); though the EDL endured, media interest diminished. Meanwhile, the emergence of groups such as UKIP nationally and Britain First at the London Assembly election in 2016 has since ensured that supporters of the previous groups have not remained politically homeless (Goodwin, 2012; Margetts, 2016). Looking to the future, Helen Margetts has warned that groups such as BF, other small parties that have yet to emerge, or a post-UKIP populist radical right party might once again mobilise and firmly embed these supporters within British politics (2016).

## **Concluding remarks**

As described above, Britain has often been considered ‘exceptional’ in its experience of radical right success compared to the rest of Europe. Macropolitical factors such as antifascism or political systems are often cited as reasons behind this. However, this characterisation has come under increased scrutiny, with micropolitical factors such as poor leadership increasingly cited (Eatwell, 2000). This shift dovetails with this study’s examination specifically of the social media strategies of radical right groups as an interesting and seemingly important aspect of UKIP and BF’s strategy, buttressed by the critical approach to guard against deterministic analysis. Moreover, reviewing the origins of the radical right also provides an indication of the ideological positions and rhetoric deployed by BF and UKIP’s predecessors that both groups either emulate (consciously or subconsciously) or distinguish themselves against. The next chapter shall turn to the quantitative aspect of the case study of Britain First and discuss some subsequent empirical findings.

## Chapter 5

### Britain First Quantitative Analysis

#### Introduction

Britain First, clearly, do not conform to popular conceptualisations of social media movements. Research has characterised BF as radical in their opposition to established political, economic and media elites, as well as nativist, nationalist, socially conservative, anti-globalist and, at times, apocalyptically and pessimistically eschatological. As such, the group represents an interesting counterexample to both aspects of techno-determinism.

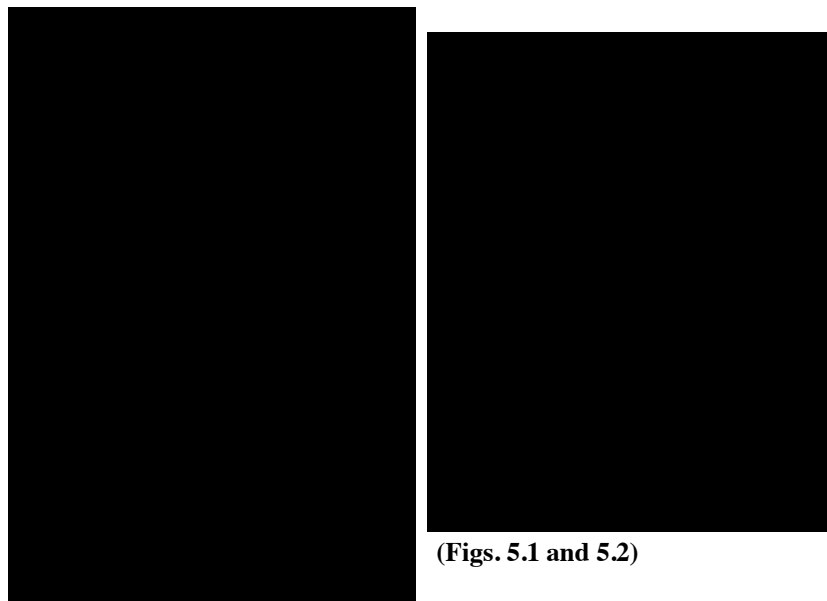
The first section shall provide a quantitative overview of Britain First's strategy. It shall first examine the group's official Facebook page, its most important platform. Next, this chapter shall examine the trends over time. It shall focus on how BF's message became increasingly focused on nativist content by selectively using current events to justify other, non-digital campaigns. Third, this chapter shall examine the group's various video channels. Britain First maintained a presence across several video-hosting platforms, including YouTube, Pewtube and LiveLeak, as an additional method of reaching users. Subsequently, their attempts to communicate to followers and mobilise them financially and to direct action shall be analysed. Finally, analytical focus shall shift to how BF responded to Facebook's changing algorithmic arrangements.

#### Facebook - Overall Analysis

Britain First have been singularly defined by their success on Facebook. The significance of its following and level of engagement in a traditional sense, whether this is

defined in terms of votes, membership or financial support, has arguably instead become secondary, if not outright irrelevant. Rather, Britain First's principal success on Facebook, first and foremost, is that it made them relevant and newsworthy in the first place. Without reference to social media, it is beyond probable that BF would have remained a relatively unknown actor engaged in local-level campaigning rather than the national curiosity it has since become.

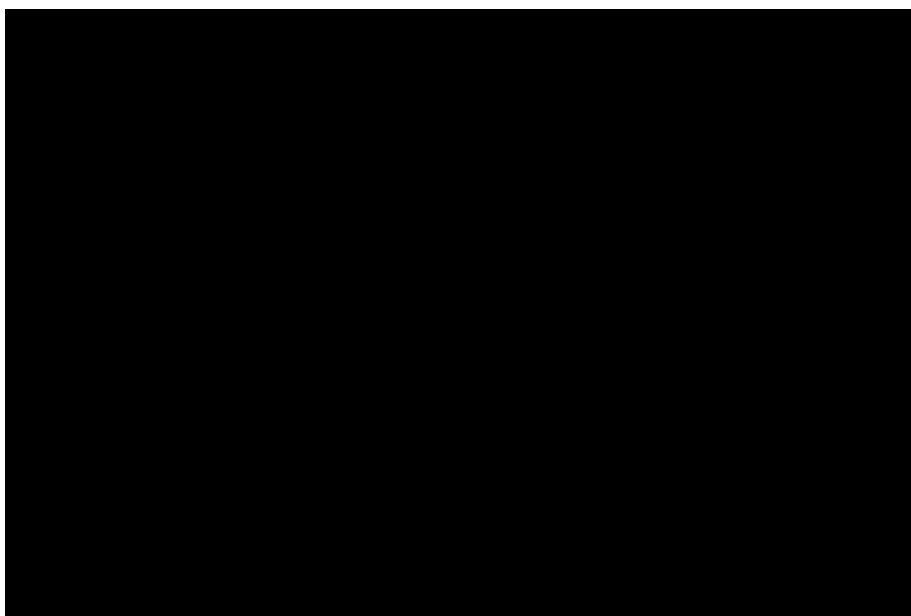
As such, the most striking aspect of Britain First's social media was the quantity of output generated. In 2014 alone, BF posted almost 7,400 times total, averaging roughly 600 posts per month or about twenty posts per day. In 2015, this increased to almost 11,800 times, at around 982 posts per month or thirty-two posts per day. In 2016, they posted as many times as the previous two years combined with 17,000, at 1,432 posts per month or forty-six posts per day. This pace outstripped UKIP by an order of magnitude in the equivalent timespan.



Another distinctive feature of BF's content underpinned by the capacity of social media was the generation of viral and politically opportunistic campaign materials. These were interspersed between self-promotional posts and more radical content. The repetitive reemphasis of evocative images of Lee Rigby, anti-paedophilia memes, animal rights,

remembrance, and the British monarchy were popular themes. Of the top 100 posts categorised by ‘Facebook reactions’: 18 celebrated the armed forces; 12 invoked nostalgic themes of remembrance and wartime sacrifice; 15 were pro-monarchy (half of which invoked images of Princess Diana) (figs. 5.1 and 5.2); 7 were anti-paedophile memes; 6 were pro-animal rights memes; and 6 invoked the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby (of which all but one fantasised about the deaths of his attackers). A further three of these posts also referenced incident where a member of the Queen’s Guard pointed a bayonet at a man during an altercation at Buckingham Palace in 2014 (Jivanda, 2014; Sky News, 2017) (figs. 5.3 and 5.4). In total, viral clickbait-style and politically opportunistic posts accounted for sixty-nine percent of the top output, in contrast with only around eight percent of the entire corpus. Finally, BF recognised the importance Internet memes to frame and express narratives through the communicative subtext of popular internet culture (Grundlingh, 2017).

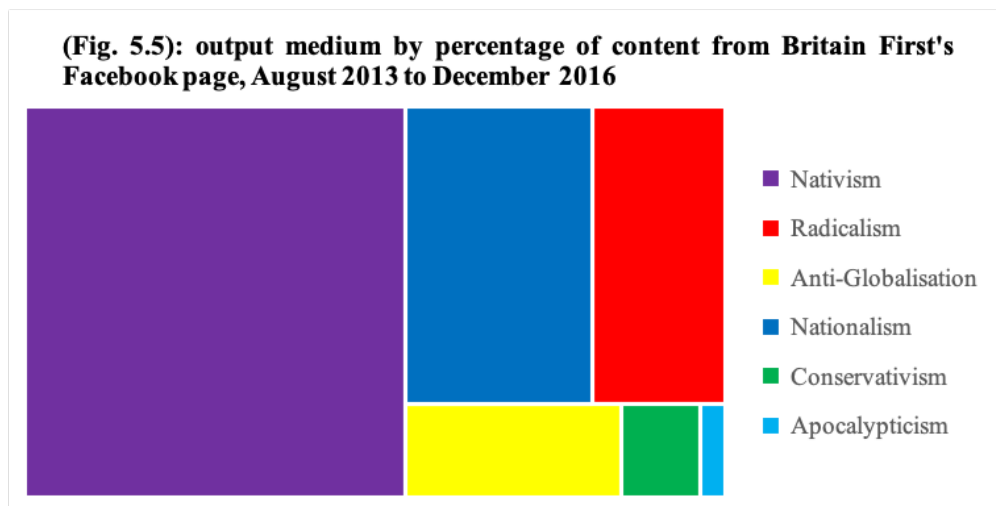
(Figs. 5.3 and 5.4)



Three categories emerged as the ideological agenda of BF’s content (fig. 5.5). Unsurprisingly for a radical right group entitled “Britain First”, within the *collective identity*



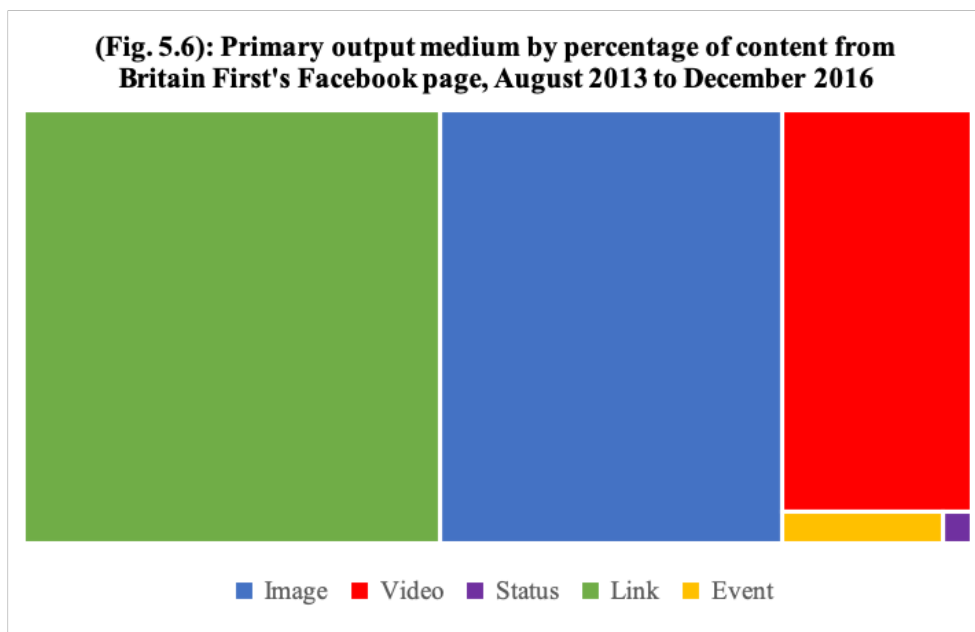
dimension, these subcategories were *nativism* (roughly 33 percent) and *nationalism* (roughly 28 percent). The *radicalism* category occupied roughly a tenth of the discourse; by contrast, the *Euroscepticism* comprised a relatively tiny portion of the corpus (less than 2 percent). Within the *organisational* dimension, the largest portion comprised the *communication* category (roughly 19.5 percent), followed by the *mobilisation* category (roughly 16 percent). Despite their supposed reliance on social media for funding, the *finance* category only accounted for roughly six percent of the overall output. Of these ideological positions, the most commonly recurring themes were: Islamoprejudiced nativism (appearing in around 23 percent of posts), militarism (around 9.7 percent), political radicalism (9.1 percent) and ethno-national nativism (8.4 percent). Instances of anti-Semitism, by contrast, occurred in almost none of BF's content. Jewish people were never explicitly demonised; only two images posted were critical of kosher, shared from other sources that were also anti-halal, and the accompanying status sought to reframe the images in explicitly Islamoprejudiced terms.



The BF Facebook page utilised a variety of mediums, including images, videos, shared posts, and links to news articles, websites and blogs (fig. 5.6). 98.6 percent of posts contained either embedded visuals or links to other media; less than one in five hundred posts (roughly 0.1996 percent) were text-only. Often, links and videos were paired with images with minimal supporting text (other than the near-ubiquitous “LIKE and SHARE”) to maximise visual

impact. 36 percent of the entire corpus (13,366 posts) used embedded photographic or computer-generated still imagery. Roughly 18.5 percent (6,909 posts) contained embedded video, whilst approximately an additional 7.7 percent (around 2860 posts) contained links to external video, such as the group's YouTube and LiveLeak channels.

Thus, Britain First recognised Facebook's capacity to disseminate large quantities of multimedia content for political campaigning, or otherwise that their overall strategy was compatible with these characteristics. The use of Facebook pages as a mainstream user-friendly platform to host multimedia content with no theoretical limit on quantity clearly facilitates this approach. Similarly, the group recognised the suitability of visual propaganda methods to stand out against cluttered Facebook news feeds and game algorithms, demonstrating an awareness of tailoring content to the expectations of their passive audience (Allen, 2014: 359).

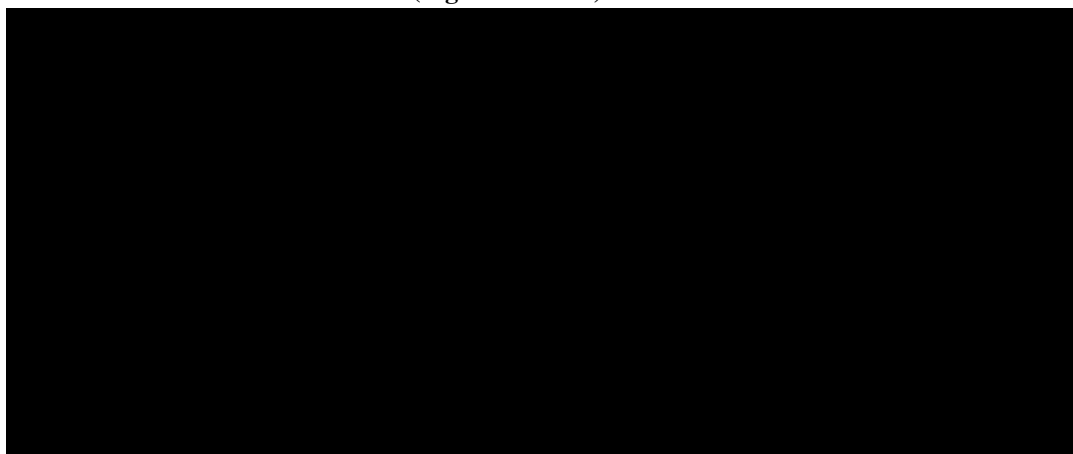


Finally, 53.6 percent of the entire corpus (19865 total posts) contained links, either as embedded link previews with accompanying text (16,265 posts) or as URLs within the accompanying text of other posts. Predominantly, posts linked to the Britain First official website or to affiliates (such as [www.jaydafransen.com](http://www.jaydafransen.com)). In total, links to official or affiliated BF sites totalled 43 percent of links (8569 posts) or 23.1 percent of the entire corpus. As such,

BF's Facebook page acted as a gateway to other sites that otherwise would not have gained the same level of exposure.

Beyond promoting their own affiliates, Britain First also utilised Facebook to share online articles from newspapers, blogs and websites that either reinforced ideological perspectives or took opposing perspectives that were then reframed (fig. 7.7). BF also shared all articles that drew attention to the group, including those that labelled them “vile” or “far-right” like the *Mirror* article in March 2014. 22.25 percent of all links (4,429 posts, or 11.9 percent of the corpus) were articles from middle-market or ‘red-top’ tabloid newspapers, whilst only 4 percent of links (806, or 2 percent total) were to articles published by broadsheets. 4,162 posts linked to right-wing middle-market or red-top papers (*The Daily Mail*, *The Express* and *The Sun*), whilst only 366 posts linked to centre-right or conservative broadsheets (*The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Telegraph*), 226 linked to left-wing red-tops (*The Mirror*) and 420 linked to quality centre-left or liberal papers (*The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *The Independent*). Surprisingly, 451 articles also linked to the BBC, despite BF's opposition to the broadcaster for being “liberal”, “leftie” and “propaganda”. By comparison, they shared only 9 articles from *The Sun*, whom they were similarly critical of following the publication a negative article (fig. 7.8).

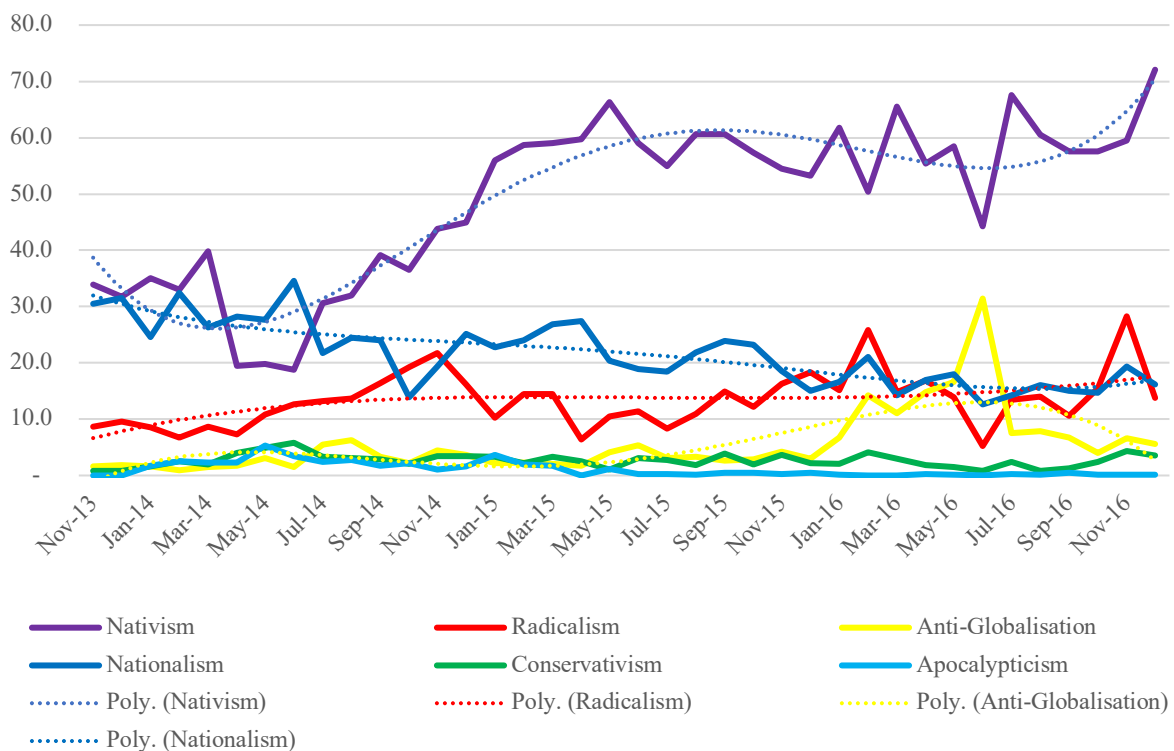
(Fig. 5.7 and 5.8)



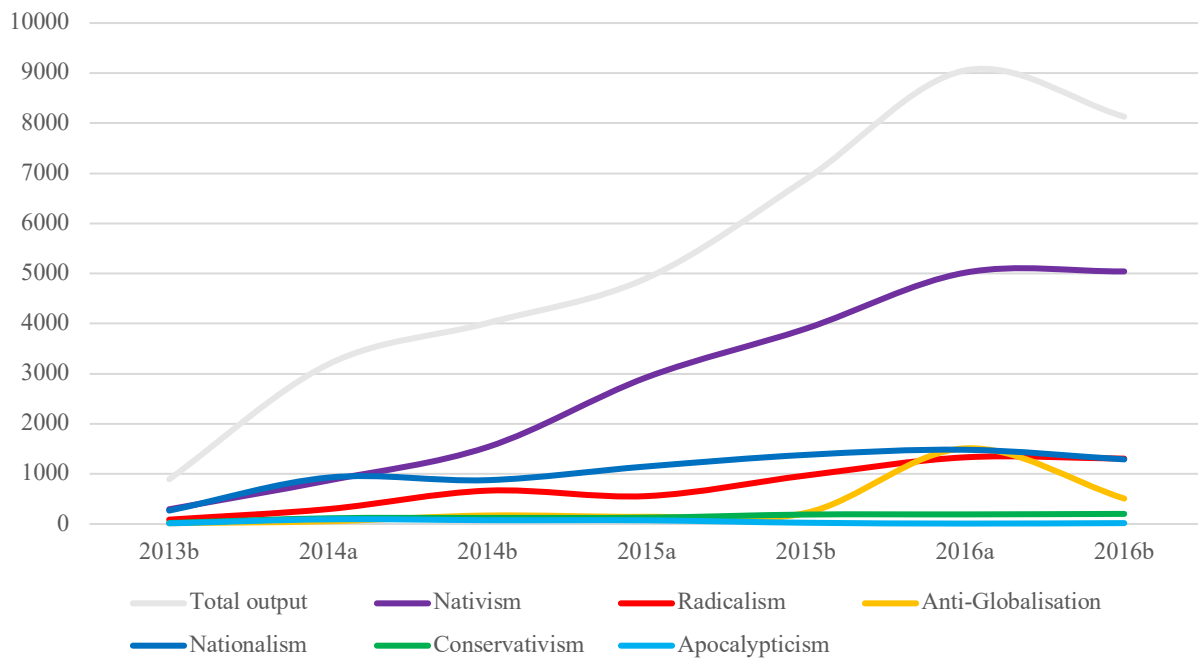
## Month-By-Month Facebook Trends

Having briefly examined overall trends, this chapter shall now examine monthly trends. Analysing monthly trends provides insight into how Britain First's ideological content and use of multimedia changed over time in response to changes in strategy, tastes and underlying algorithmic arrangements. Moreover, examining monthly trends also provides understanding of how social media facilitated political opportunism and dynamic responses to current events. In this way, this study emphasises an approach to social media literature endorsed by scholars such as Paulo Gerbaudo that does not try to answer macro-level normative or outcome-oriented questions about social media, but more specific questions about content strategy and overarching objectives for groups operating on social media themselves.

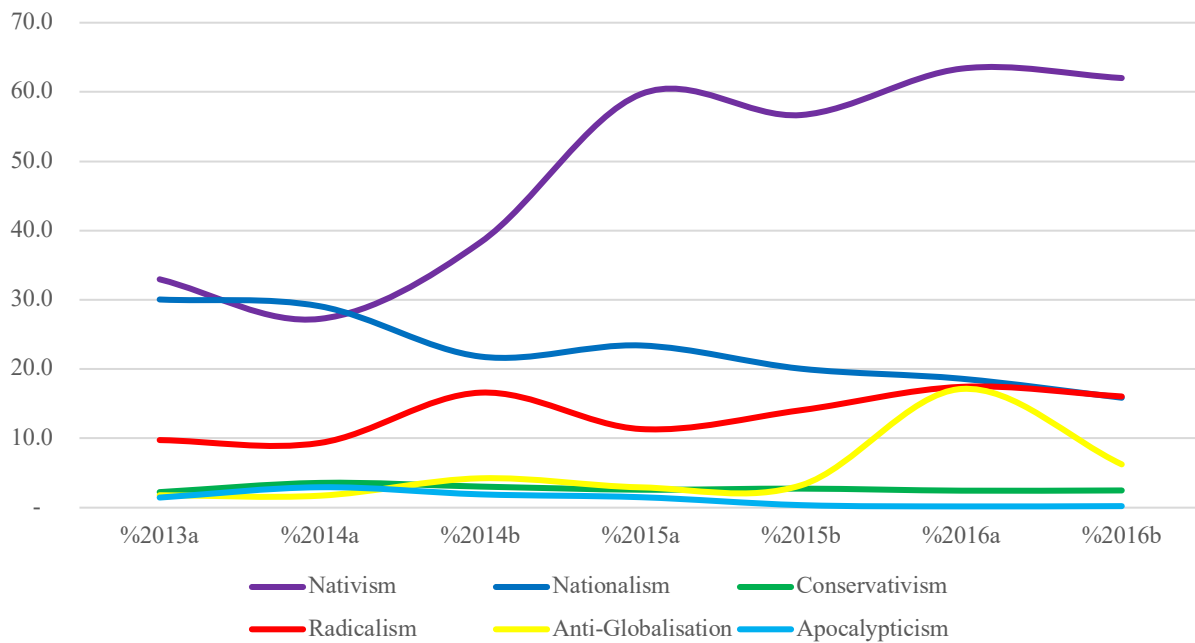
(Fig.5.9): Percentage of monthly output by narrative on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016



**(Fig.5.10): Total six month outputs by narrative on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016**



**(Fig.5.11): Percentage of six month output by narrative on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016**



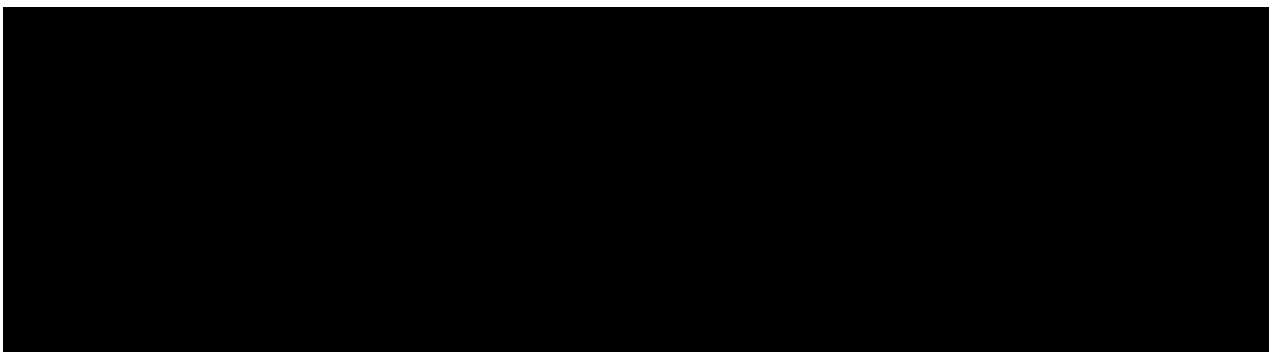
- August to December 2013

Although Britain First's first posts on Facebook were posted in August 2013, the page did not substantively begin as an outlet for regular content until late October. In November and December, the group posted 360 and 488 times respectively, well below the group's total average between 2014 and 2016 of just over 1,000 posts a month.

In 2013, Britain First was consistently concerned with *nativist* and *nationalist*-coded content, which manifested in approximately 30-40 percent and 24-30 percent of all posts respectively. This was notably higher than the average for the entire corpus, which comprised roughly 25 percent and 20 percent of all posts respectively. In terms of nativist content, the two most common themes were anti-immigration and anti-Islam posts, with the former comprising 34.4 percent of nativist posts (55 coded as anti-immigration out of 160 total) and the latter comprising 65 percent (104 out of 160 coded as Islamoprejudiced). In particular, Britain First's content often emphasised the importance of suppressing Islam ostensibly to diminish the influence of hate preachers and justified this suppression by asserting that "Islam is not a race". Similarly, their content also emphasised the typifying idea of migrants as scroungers 'attracted' by welfare, rather than as economic migrants or genuine refugees. BF also consistently used Facebook to characterise those it considered part of the political, social and global 'elite' as illegitimate, traitors, or corrupt. Interestingly, in 2013, they considered UKIP a part of the political establishment, which would change following the latter's emergence.

In 2013, Britain First began using populist images. During the end of October and into early November, for instance, the group published numerous posts incorporating imagery of Remembrance or of nostalgic nationalism extolling wartime British heroism and sacrifice. Images included photos and graphics of poppies and candles, and black-and-white photos of British soldiers fighting. In total, just over 8.6 percent of posts in November 2013 (31 of 360 total) featured such imagery, concentrated on or before Remembrance Sunday.

Britain First's posts also seemed to contradict previous ones even within the same week or day as previous content (figs. 5.12 and 5.13). In their first post following his death, BF posted a status saying, "REST IN PEACE NELSON MANDELA" and appeared to relativise Mandela's convictions in comparison to "our politicians". The very next post then stated, "IRA ENABLER DEAD!!!!!" and compared Mandela to Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot. Subsequently, BF produced several anti-Mandela posts, including one that branded him a "[t]errorist, racist, communist, IRA supporter and failed politician" and another that accused him of raging a "race war against white South Africans".

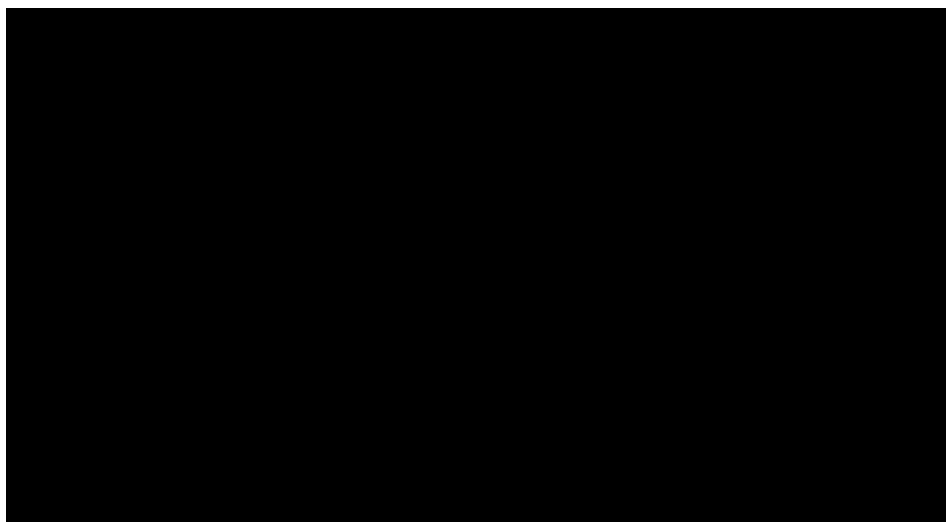


(Figs. 5.12 and 5.13)

#### **- January to June 2014**

In 2014, Britain First began to formulate a more sophisticated strategy for social media. By the beginning of May, the group's following already totalled 300,000 followers, and reached 338,000 followers by the 20<sup>th</sup> (fig. 5.11). During this time, the rate of growth exceeded 8,000 new followers per day. With a massive increase in followers came a simultaneous expansion in reach; during the week of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the page achieved over 3.3 million interactions (Waterson, 2014). This growth continued into summer, as the group reached 500,000 followers by June 27<sup>th</sup> (fig. 5.12), which was followed up by a post where they declared themselves 'Facebook champions'. However, the group also faced new challenges. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Britain First website was subject to a distributed denial-of-service attack. For most of the day,

the website was temporarily disabled by a flood of incoming traffic from multiple sources. At first, this was attributed to the publicity of their Christian Patrol video filmed in January, which was the first of such publicised on Facebook; the video itself featured several Britain First activists attempting to provoke Muslim worshippers outside an in East London mosque in response to an infamous Shariah Patrol in 2013. The DDOS itself, however, did little to impact BF's reach; over one week in April, their page was viewed by over 40 million people.



(Figs. 7.11 and 7.12)

From January, Britain First began incorporating elements that would become staples of their content for the corpus. BF began developing an identity in their posts in small ways that helped 'brand' content, such as by including signatures such as "Onwards Christian Soldiers" (often shortened to "OCS!") and "No Surrender!" (or sometimes "Never Surrender"). In terms of quantity, output was relatively consistent. On average, the group published around 530 posts per month, which was an increase from the average between August and December 2013. For January to May, the total number of posts ranged between 431 (February) and 562 (January), with the outlier being June when the level of output increased significantly to 671 posts. This increased output was compounded by the addition of calls to action in the accompanying text



of most posts, often stylised as “SHARE and LIKE”, to encourage followers to engage and share content.

In terms of ideological positions, Britain First continued to post nativist content, which accounted for 27.2 percent of posts (869 of posts out of 3,189). Again, Islamoprejudiced content in particular was most prominent between January and June. Islamoprejudiced themes accounted for 84 percent of nativist posts and 22.9 percent of all posts (730 posts total) in this time. Over this period, Islam was consistently linked with extremism, terrorism, domestic abuse, paedophilia and ‘rape gangs’. Muslim women were described as participating in “jihad of the womb” due to supposed high birth rates and Muslim migrants were often described as ‘invading’ British spaces. Places of presumed high levels of multiculturalism and diversity were pejoratively labelled with epithets such as “Boltonistan”, “Rochdalistan” and “Halalifax”. Proportionately, other ideological content was also similarly consistent from 2013 (fig. 5.11).

#### **- July to December 2014**

In the latter half of 2014, Britain First continued its strong follower growth. By August, BF exceeded 400,000 likes, and by September this had reached 450,000. By the end of 2014, the group had in excess of 607,000 followers. The second half of 2014 also saw a significant increase in the proportion of nativist and anti-establishment content. In terms of six-month averages, the proportion of nativist content reached 38.3 percent of posts (1,536 of posts out of 4,012), up from 27.2 percent (fig. 5.11). Similarly, monthly percentages, which ranged from 30.7 percent to 44.9 percent, increased every month except between September and October (fig. 5.9). Anti-Islam rhetoric also became increasingly extreme. In September, for instance, the group published several posts drawing attention to Islamic State beheadings (posting about them 5 times) and hate preachers (taking credit for putting pressure on SO19 to arrest Anjem

Choudary). In November, they began posting decontextualized extracts from Islamic scripture as part of their “Verses from the Koran” series to delegitimise the Quran and hadith. The group also protested the vote to construct a new Mosque in Dudley, threatening that “[f]or every Muslim that voted for this, we’ll bury a pig on your ground”. Finally, one video in December warned about the difference in ‘fertility rates’ between Muslim and non-Muslim families.

Britain First also began to justify Islamoprejudiced content by reminding followers of prominent terrorist attacks. 6 emotive posts marked the 7/7 London bombings, whilst 14 images posted in September graphically depicted 9/11 World Trade Center bombings. BF also posted several times about contemporary terrorist attacks across the world. In October and November, for instance, 9 posts concerned the shootings at Canada’s Parliament Hill by a Canadian convert, emphasising his religion but not mentioning his history of mental illness, drug addiction, homelessness and habitual offending. In December, 46 posts concerned the Sydney hostage crisis, again emphasising the perpetrator’s (an Iranian-born Australian citizen) religion.

Britain First also began deploying extreme anti-immigrant tropes. Issues became increasingly racialised, described as affecting perceived ‘natives’ by ‘non-natives’. The group consistently framed immigrants as vectors of disease in several posts, such as with one in October that cited immigrants as causing the spread of Ebola and HIV. This occurred most notably in the September and October in several videos framing Rotherham as “Roma dominated” and “Roma infested”. Activists were featured marching through the town chanting “Roma gypsies/Off our streets”. In November, these sentiments were actualised into specific policy agendas at the party conference, which included scrapping the UK’s foreign aid budget, ending ‘health tourism’, constitutionally requiring governments to hold referenda on opening borders and any other transfer of powers, deporting foreign criminals and repatriating illegal immigrants.

This period also saw a slight increase in anti-globalisation-coded content. In July, the group started a petition for Britain to withdraw from the European Union, which was publicised numerous times. In October, BF also notably switched to a sympathetic stance on UKIP, congratulating Douglas Carswell for his Clacton by-election victory on October 9<sup>th</sup> and John Bickley for finishing second by only 600 votes in Heywood and Middleton. In a video published on October 25<sup>th</sup>, Deputy Leader Jayda Fransen encouraged voters in Rochester and Strood to vote UKIP if not Britain First, where she was standing as a candidate, and reassured voters that they were “not here to split the vote” and were “singing from the same hymn sheet” on everything except the “Islamic issue”. The group also consistently expressed their opposition to Turkey joining the EU, and their opposition to the EU itself for the same reason.

#### **- January to June 2015**

Though there was not a significant increase in output between January and June from the previous 6 months, there was a notable change in the type of content and amount of exposure Britain First produced and gained. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, their content reached over 86 million people worldwide. Between May 20<sup>th</sup> and May 26<sup>th</sup>, they reached over 63 million people worldwide, achieving 729,000 followers (including 7,000 in that week alone). This was summarised by the *Independent* in February, which stated that the “Tories spend more than £100,000 a month on Facebook - but still can't beat Britain First” (Withnall, 2015a).

Despite publicising online successes, BF opted against fielding candidates in the 2015 general election. Regarding the election itself, the group promoted and supported UKIP. As such, rather than produce content for the election, BF simply shared UKIP election materials. Instead, BF focused attention elsewhere, invading Rotherham council premises and holding a rally in Scotland in February, disrupting a Stand Up To UKIP meeting in March, and organising

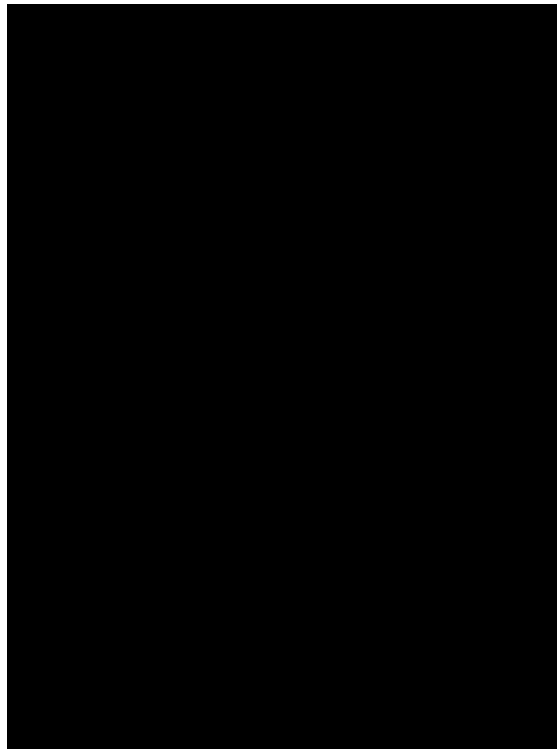
a day of action in Rochdale and rally in Dudley in May. On January 31<sup>st</sup>, BF also promoted their ‘Solidarity Patrol’ in support of the Jewish community in Golders Green, London, and launched ‘Operation Payback’ on April 13<sup>th</sup> to “[take] the fight to the left”. In June, they also launched a campaign against restaurants selling products using halal meat on the grounds that the purchase of halal included *zakat*, which the group misconstrued as funding terrorism.

Finally, the proportion of nativist content increased again from the previous six months, up to 59.7 percent from 38.3 percent. Between December 2014 and January 2015 alone, the proportion of posts increased from 44.9 percent (425 posts out of 946) to 56 percent (475 out of 848). Again, the increase was caused by an increase in Islamoprejudiced content (2,587 posts out of 2,929 nativist-coded posts or 88.3 percent). This was underpinned by an increasing proportion of shared news articles (1,479 posts, or 57.2 percent of Islamoprejudiced posts). In January and February, for instance, 57 of 89 total posts about the Charlie Hebdo attack were reposted articles. In January, a further 4 news stories were shared following the Brussels Antiterror Raid, and in February, 14 news stories were shared about the spate of shootings in Copenhagen. Importantly, even as BF doubled down on Islamoprejudiced content, their following and rates of engagement continued to grow, meaning that their ideological positions did not preclude social media success.

### **- July to December 2015**

Britain First continued its follower growth throughout 2015. In July, the group reached 800,000 likes and claimed to reach over 300 million people per month through Facebook. Moreover, the Britain First website, according to the Alexa official rankings, overtook the Lib Dem website in popularity, which led to the group reposting older stories from the website to improve traffic further. By September, BF reached 902,000 likes, almost twice that of any other

political party. November was perhaps the most significant month in terms of followers, however. By November 10<sup>th</sup>, BF exceeded one million likes (fig. 5.13); by the 16<sup>th</sup>, the party exceeded 1,050,000; by the 21<sup>st</sup>, they reached 1,101,000. Moreover, on the 16<sup>th</sup>, they claimed to have reached 81,693,000 people and engaged 7,514,000 in the previous week, and on the 21<sup>st</sup> claimed to have reached 119,148,000 and engaged 17,124,000. By December, the Britain First website had become the most popular political website in the UK, in spite of Labour's recent leadership election.

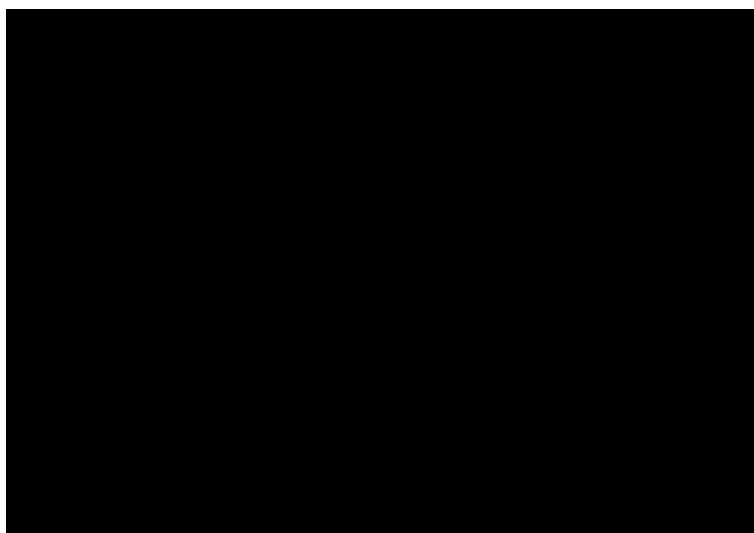


(Fig. 5.13)

However, in early November, the group was widely criticised by mainstream media outlets including *The Independent*, ITV and the *Huffington Post* for using a photo of Lee Rigby. BF had previously come under fire in 2014 for using the slogan “Remember Lee Rigby” in election materials despite Rigby’s family releasing a statement through the Ministry of Defence asking extreme right groups to stop using his name and image earlier in the year (Blair, 2015). Indeed, several comments on the original post conveyed the family’s wishes; even so, Britain

First blamed the “left-wing media” for the issue. This, along with criticism of Chesterfield City Council (who cancelled BF’s party conference in November), a petition campaign against postal voting, criticism of Douglas Carswell after he called for Farage to resign as leader of UKIP and overt support for Marine Le Pen all contributed to an increase in anti-establishment content (up from 557 posts to 968 posts, or 11.3 percent to 14.1 percent).

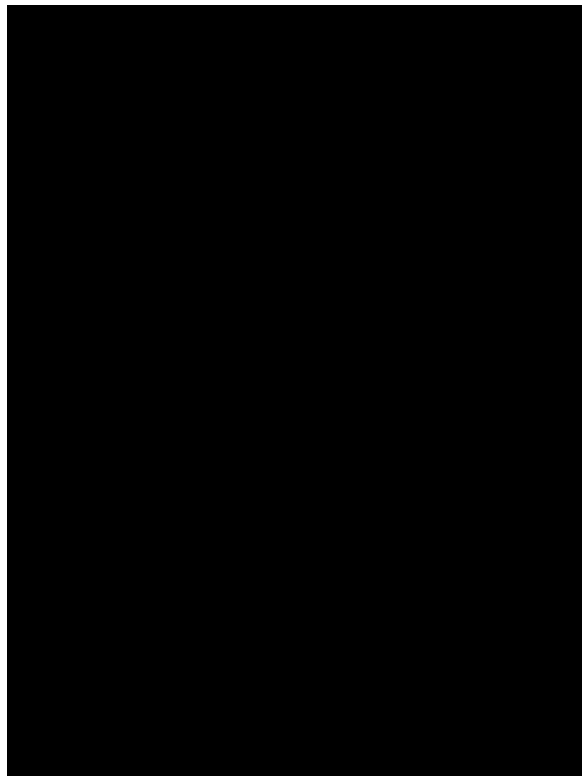
On November 30<sup>th</sup>, Facebook shut down Britain First’s official Facebook page for breaching hate speech rules. In response, the group began publishing content through backup pages, referring to the incident as a “fascist attack” and threatened legal action on the basis of BF’s registered party status. The page was restored after an hour and a half; Facebook subsequently apologised and asserted that the page was “removed in error” (Titcomb, 2015) (fig. 5.14). On the one hand, Facebook’s removal of the page and BF’s subsequent reaction demonstrated a dependency on following community guidelines for groups dependent on social media for communicating with and engaging followers. On the other hand, ultimately, the group was protected by the democratic institutions through their party status.



(Fig. 5.14)

During this period, Britain First also increased the number of direct-action campaigns. In July, days of action was held in Rotherham and the West Midlands against the Craven Arms Islamic Centre and local burial grounds. In August, they held a ‘Support the Truckers’ day of

action protesting against illegal migrants. In September and October respectively, BF held public marches through the towns of Rotherham and Burton-on-Trent. In another campaign in October, activists from the so-called ‘Northern Brigade’ invaded twenty-six mosques and handed out anti-Islam literature and Christian Bibles to worshippers. In December, they held days of action in Dewsbury and Derby, referring to the latter as “overrun, turned into a Muslim ghetto”, and held a Christian Patrol through Brick Lane.



(Fig. 5.15)

Once again, the group also used current affairs to support their Islamoprejudiced rhetoric. In total, BF posted about the November 2015 Paris attacks 96 times and the December 2015 Leytonstone tube station attack 25 times. In the case of the latter, they posted memes, used hashtags or otherwise used 11 times the phrase “he was a Muslim bruv” (fig. 5.15), which parodied mainstream attention on one man who disavowed the attacker with the phrase “you ain’t no Muslim bruv”. BF also increasingly began to publish hostile posts about refugees,

deploying tropes that framed refugees as Muslim terrorists, ‘evidenced’ by the number of ‘fighting age men’ and apparent lack of women, elderly and children, whilst wrongly condemning neighbouring ‘Muslim countries’ as not taking any.

### **- January to June 2016**

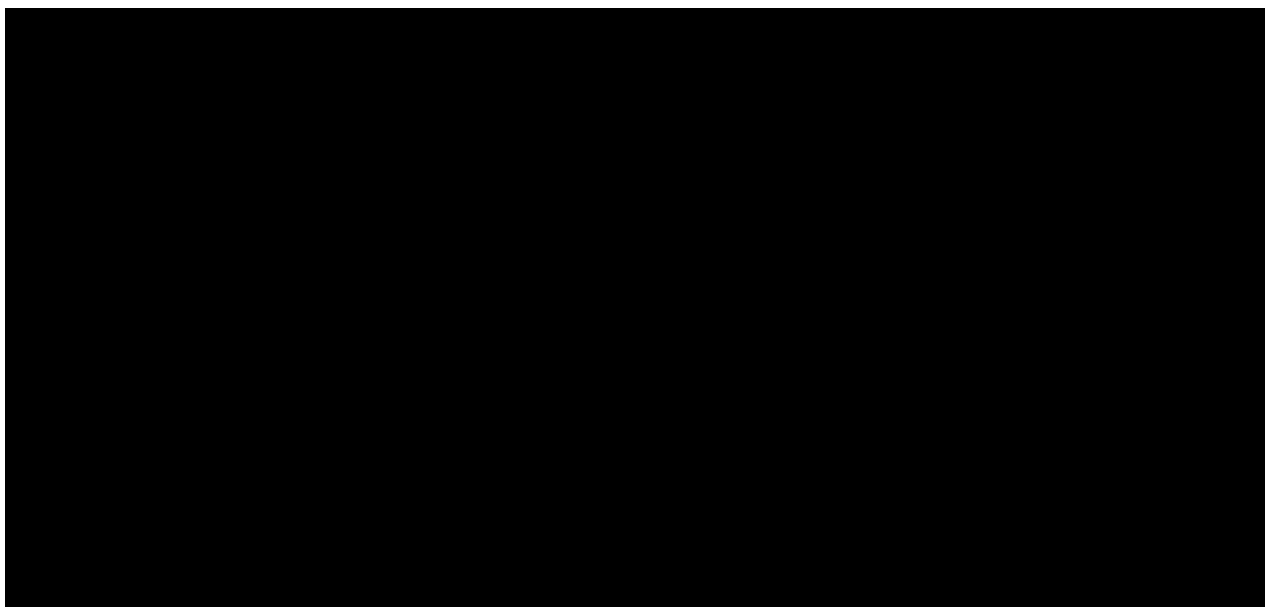
January to June 2016 saw a significant spike in anti-globalisation-coded posts, underpinned primarily by an increase in Eurosceptic posts prior to the EU referendum. Proportionately, anti-globalisation-coded posts increased significantly three times (fig. 5.9). First, anti-globalisation content increased from 3 percent to 6.7 percent (from 41 posts out of 1,353 to 93 out of 1388). from December 2015 to January 2016. Second, from January to February output increased from 6.7 percent to 14.2 percent (to 197 out of 1,388). Finally, in May, the number of posts increased from 16.6 percent to 31.4 percent (from 255 out of 1,536 posts to 600 out of 1,909 posts). In part, this final increase was underpinned by posting referendum results live until the final result was declared. In total, between January and June anti-globalisation-coded posts made up 1,510 posts of 9,054 compared to 1,115 posts total out of 28,014 for the rest of the corpus. This occurred even as nationalism-coded posts fell 16.4 percent for January to June from 20.1 percent.

One key aspect was the emphasis on Euroscepticism combined with universalising anti-Islam and anti-refugee rhetoric. One key dimension of BF content was to reference the New Year’s Eve mass sexual assaults in Germany. In total, these assaults were referenced in 77 posts over the six months, including 50 in January. Concurrently, they also continued to reference terrorist attacks. ‘Popular’ subjects included the 2016 Brussels bombings (115 posts), the arrest of Paris attack perpetrator Salah Abdeslam (47 posts) and the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting (43 posts). In total, there were 252 posts regarding terrorist incidents. Again, this



dovetailed direct action in Canterbury, Bradford, Luton and Whitechapel and campaigning ahead of the London mayoral election.

Britain First also posted several times about sympathetic foreign leaders. Vladimir Putin, for instance, was posted about 17 times. In January, they posted 10 times in support following allegations made linked to the death of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian defector and former FSB secret service officer, in 2006. From January they began sharing election materials from the Trump Republican primary campaign. In total, 252 posts in support of Trump's campaign against the 'Establishment' were shared, including 58 posts in February, 74 in March and 64 in April.

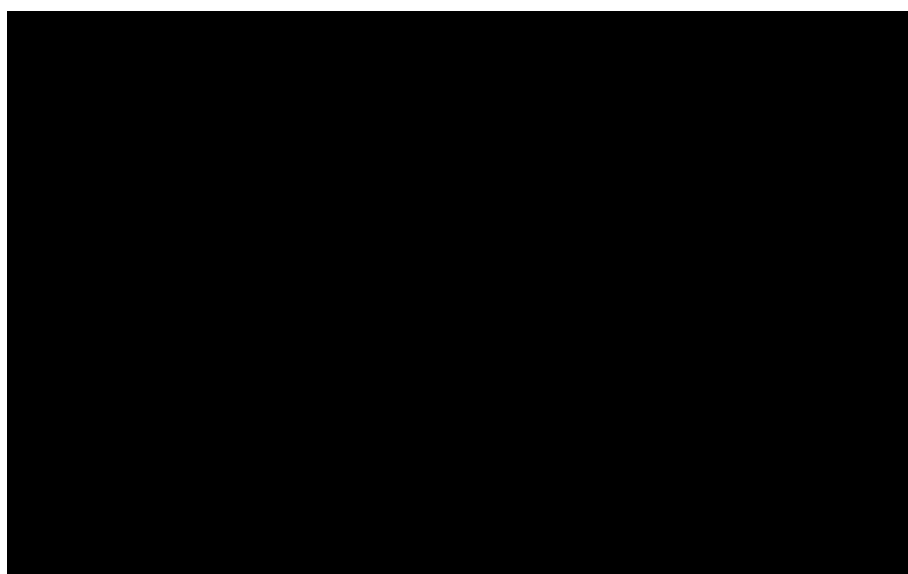


(Figs. 5.16 and 5.17)

#### **- July to December 2016**

The final six months saw nativist-coded posts increase again. Proportionately, the number of posts increased from 55.4 percent from January to June to 62 percent from July to December. As with previous months, these posts preceded direct action targeting Muslim people, with campaigns against the construction of mosques in Gillingham (leafletting 2,500

houses with Britain First material) and Redbridge, demonstrations in Birmingham and Oldham, and invasions of two halal abattoirs and mosques in Bolton, Rochdale, Oldham and Dudley. Finally, they continued to use terrorist attacks to relativise Islamoprejudiced propaganda and campaigns. Between July and December, 385 posts concerned attacks across the world, particularly in July with 278 posts. This included posts about the 2016 Munich shooting (58 posts), the 2016 Nice truck attack (62 posts), the 2016 Normandy church attack (25 posts), the Russell Square stabbing (18 posts) and the 2016 Berlin truck attack at Breitscheidplatz Christmas market (45 posts).

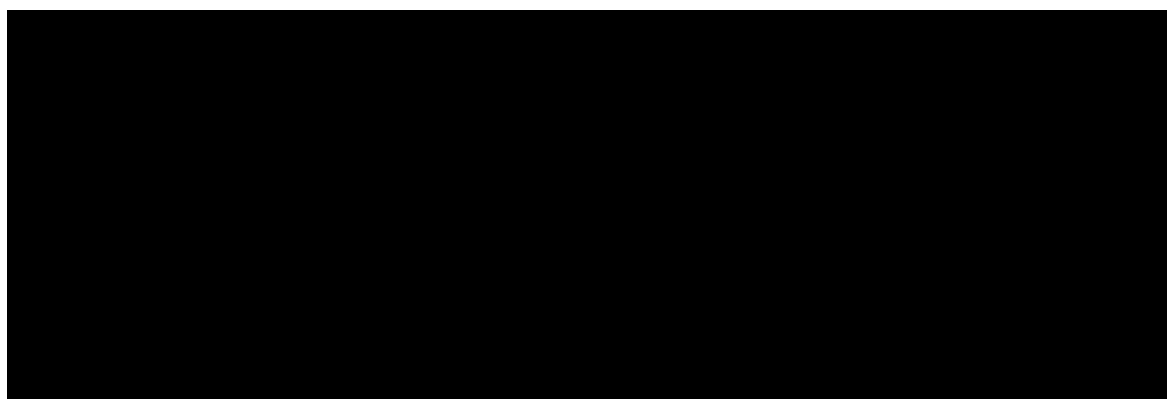


(Figs. 5.18 and 5.19)

Though proportionately nativist-coded posts increased, nominally the number of posts stayed constant. Between January and June, this totalled 5,017 posts, and between July and December, this increased slightly to 5,042. Rather, for the first time, the total quantity of output decreased, from 9,054 to 8,131, or 1,509 per month to roughly 1,355 per month. This was likely due to several police disruptions of group activity throughout these months. In August, Jayda Fransen was charged with three offenses in Luton for skipping bail, wearing political uniform and religiously aggregated harassment for an altercation with a Muslim convert during a march

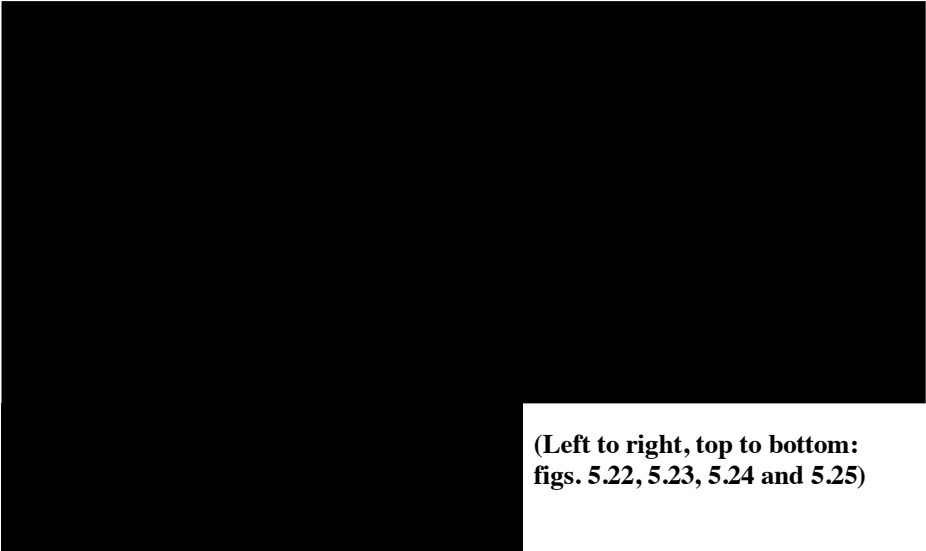
through Bury Park. Party leader Paul Golding was also banned from entering Luton at a high court hearing for confronting an Imam during a mosque invasion. In November, Fransen was found guilty for the latter charges (figs. 5.18 and 5.19), whilst Golding was served with a high court summons, and in December was sent to prison by a high court judge.

Despite this, in a video about the Conservative leadership election, Paul Golding asserted that “Britain First reaches tens of millions of Brits every week on social media”. This claim was evidenced several months by posts of analytics obtained through Facebook Insights. In October, the group exceeded 1.5 million followers. Between September 29<sup>th</sup> and October 5<sup>th</sup>, Britain First’s content reached 22 million people; between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and October 8<sup>th</sup>, BF reached 32 million. Between November 10<sup>th</sup> and November 16<sup>th</sup>, BF was gaining over 5 million engagements on all posts.

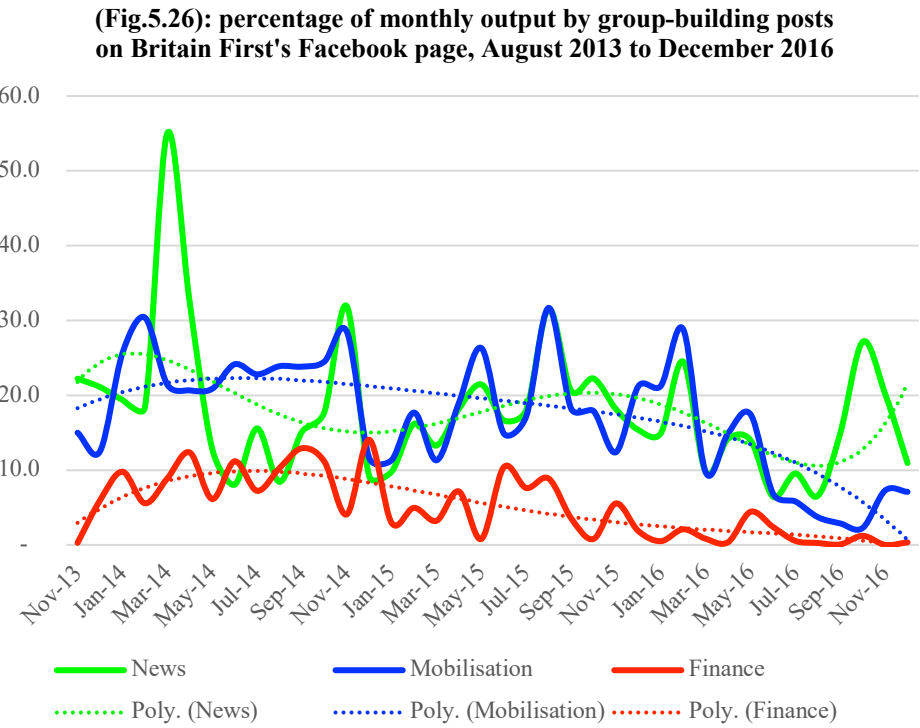


(Figs. 5.20 and 5.21)

The pro-Trump posts that began in January continued through July to December. Over the six-month span, BF posted 644 times about Trump or shared pro-Trump content. This included 230 times in October and 206 times in November in the run up to, day of, and weeks after Trump’s election as President on November 8<sup>th</sup>. Similarly, the group also continued posting in support of Putin, though not to the same magnitude as Trump. In total, the group posted 88 times in support of Putin over these six months.



### Movement-building on Facebook



As well as communicating their ideological agendas, Britain First also used their Facebook to build their movement in several ways. First, BF disseminated news updates about campaigns, events, membership, social media, future aims and general housekeeping. This included any press attention, which was uniformly negative. BF's leadership also used the page to update followers on their financial or legal status, such as the legal challenge to Facebook when their page was temporarily removed, the high court injunction preventing them from entering mosques (which Golding subsequently breached and was imprisoned for) and the control order restricting Fransen and Golding from entering Luton and requiring them to sign on at a police station on a weekly basis.

Quantitatively, news-coded posts occurred at a relatively inconsistent rate (fig. 5.26). One peak between March and April 2014 (55 percent and 32.4 percent of posts respectively), for instance, occurred because as Britain First used Facebook to complement email lists by publicising them (referred to as "Action Bulletins") on the majority of posts regardless of subject. These posts aimed to ensure emails were reaching senders by reminding users to add [newsletter@britainfirst.org](mailto:newsletter@britainfirst.org) to their email contacts to avoid spam filtering. Similarly, a peak in August 2015 was underpinned by BF sharing old website content between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. However, these posts also depended on what campaigns were occurring at the time. Another peak, such as in November 2014, was caused by publicity surrounding several party events and campaigns, such as the 'Protect the Poppy Campaign',<sup>11</sup> the 'Mega Mosque' protests in Dudley and the party conference, and announcements, such as an investigation by authorities into the misuse of the Queen's Crown in branding and merchandise and about Golding's intention to start a USA equivalent, 'America First'. Similarly, peaks in March and November 2016 were

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<sup>11</sup> This campaign particularly generated publicity as it was decentralized; BF leadership encouraged followers to 'guard' poppy sellers in public areas, who then submitted photos that were shared to BF's Facebook. This involved uniformed activists standing near oblivious poppy sellers or posing for photographs with unwitting scout groups and young children, which Golding endorsed, urging supporters to "stay at a distance" and "not announce themselves".

underpinned by the launch of the London elections campaign and various legal disputes respectively.

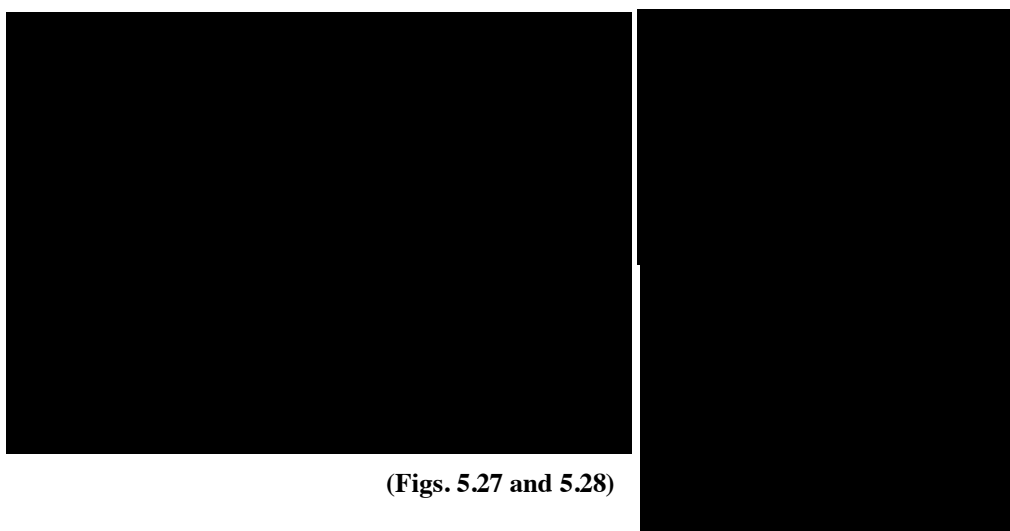
From January 2014, BF also aimed to mobilise followers through various means. Indeed, the proportion of posts that concerned group mobilisation almost doubled from 13 percent to 23.7 percent, as Britain First emphasised its petitioning, demonstrations and complaints campaigns, launched a more sustained recruitment drive and publicised its first ‘Christian Patrol’ in response to the ‘Muslim’ or ‘Shariah Patrols’ undertaken by Anjem Choudhury’s Salafi jihadist group al-Muhajiroun. First, this included minimal effort, cost-free ‘clicktivism’ by encouraging followers to sign e-petitions on various subjects or to write emails and letters of complaint. Petitions were organised on issues such as banning the burkha, opposing ‘mega mosques’ and freeing Marine ‘A’ Sergeant Alexander Blackman, a Royal Marine convicted of manslaughter in 2013. Other petitions included opposing proposals for a Muslim burial site in Catherine-de-Barnes and in support of a memorial for Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich. Notably, however, petitions were not created for causes of non-native people that BF ostensibly claimed to support, such as allowing Gurkha service personnel to obtain equal rights to British citizenship and allowing Afghan interpreters for British Armed Forces to migrate to the UK, nor did BF link to existing petitions for these causes run by other groups.

Second, this included mobilising followers to support the party democratically, through voting in elections or by campaigning. In May 2014, Britain First stood their first candidates in the 2014 European elections, which comprised half of all mobilisation-coded material produced. In total, BF stood 10 candidates, including Golding, Fransen and founder Jim Dowson in Wales and Scotland. England was avoided due to higher fees; instead, in a YouTube video Dowson encouraged English voters to vote for the English Democrats or UKIP. Prior to the election, the party successfully raised funds for and produced an election video and other

promotional material that were shared through Facebook. The group also stood for election in several key by-elections. Moreover, in 2016, the group focused its efforts on the London Mayoral and Greater London Assembly elections, which were ultimately unsuccessful. In 2015, the party chose not to stand in the general election, instead throwing its support behind UKIP.

Finally, mobilisation included encouraging followers to register as activists, join paramilitary-style member networks (such as their Armed Forces Division of ex-service personnel) and participate in direct action such as Christian Patrols, mosque invasions or counter-demonstrations against opposing groups. Indeed, the inaugural Christian Patrol in January 2014 marked an interesting change in language, as contemporaneously many aspects of Britain First's activism became increasingly military themed. For example, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the group referred to its activists as the 'New Model Army' (a reference to the Parliamentary army during the English Civil War and Restoration) and organised into regional 'battalions' with battle standards and medals ceremonies. At one medal ceremony on June 15<sup>th</sup>, Paul Golding hyperbolically claimed that one medal recipient had "risked their life" and put their "life on the line for his country" whilst undertaking party operations. The Christian Patrols and subsequent actions were undertaken in Army surplus jeeps with desert camouflage finishing. Given that Britain First often described itself as a 'political movement' and 'street defence organisation' it is unsurprising that the proportion of mobilisation-coded posts remained consistent as the total number of such posts increased with output. The number and proportion of mobilisation-coded posts only decreased following the result of the London elections in May 2016, which perhaps implied a post-election hangover following the election of Sadiq Khan. The proportion of these posts would not increase until November and December 2016, when Fransen took over as temporary leader following Golding's arrest.

Finally, Britain First attempted to leverage their following as a source of financial income. This manifested in two key ways. The first was through the online shop (fig. 5.27). BF would regularly promote official merchandise and encourage followers to buy items such as hoodies, beanies and brooches. The second was through regular donations, such as the ‘Patriots Pledge’ (a regular monthly donation of £2 or more), and by encouraging followers to join as paid members. Supplementing these sources were one-off appeals for donations. These included calls for donations to ‘Fighting Funds’ to cover the costs of legal fees or significant political campaigns (such as the EU and London election). BF also called on elderly members to bequeath posthumous donations, called ‘Legacy Payments’, which were promoted by the rhyming tagline “fight on after you’ve gone”, to allow the group to be “bolder in our aims” and to “help us meet the most pressing needs the future brings” (fig. 5.28). Others posts incorporated calls for donations as a secondary aspect to their populist or clickbait style posts. Two posts, for example, that featured Diana Spencer and advocating “[bringing] back public hangings of paedophiles and rapists” respectively added the tagline “HELP US FIGHT BACK” with a link to a group PayPal account to encourage donations.



Quantitatively, Britain First used social media to promote sources of financial support more in the early days of their movement. Proportionately, finance-coded posts were most



numerous during 2014 (fig. 5.26). The proportion of posts encouraging donations or promoting the online shop increased from 3.4 percent in 2013 to 9.2 percent for the first 6 months of 2014. In nominal terms, this represented 294 posts out of 3,189, up from 30 out of 892. Moreover, 9.8 percent of all posts from January to December 2014 were finance-coded compared to 4 percent for the corpus and 2.57 percent for the corpus excluding 2014. These funding initiatives appeared effective. Electoral Commission data indicated BF to be the UK's best-funded small party in 2014 with a total income of over £159,500. Over £15,000 came from regular membership payments (up from £3,640 in 2013) and £144,444 came from individual donations (up from £40,014) (Electoral Commission, 2015).<sup>12</sup> After 2014, the total number and proportion of posts trended downwards (proportionately decreasing by a greater than equivalent amount due to simultaneous increases in total output). The exception to this trend was a small peak from June to August 2015, when BF promoted its shop's international delivery.

In June 2014, for instance, Britain First capitalised on the centenary of the Battle of the Somme and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invasion of Normandy, evoking the emotive remembrance of “forefathers’ sacrifice”, to sell merchandise through the online store. Similarly, the group also used donate links alongside clickbait posts. One post used opposition to animal cruelty as a means of raising funds by stating “[h]elp us stop this cruelty” accompanied by a PayPal link, implying that a donation would go explicitly to a dedicated campaign (Foxton, 2014). Both proportionately and in total, the highest month was December 2014 (with 133 out of 946 total posts, or 14.1 percent). During December, the group unveiled several nativist clothing lines, featuring slogans such as ‘Infidel’, ‘Taliban Hunting Club’ and ‘Don’t Unpack, You’re Going Back’. In mid-2015, the group expanded their funding structures to include supporters around the world. From March, Britain First’s newspaper became

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<sup>12</sup> BF was, however, deregistered by the Electoral Commission for failing to pay a charge of £25 in 2017.

available to international supporters; from May, membership offers included an international membership; in June, the group rolled out international shipping on clothing. In September 2016, BF also unveiled a paid newsletter subscription for the first time. These structures proved useful when raising funds to cover the group's significant legal and campaign fees accrued in 2016.

### **Video-sharing – YouTube, PewTube and LiveLeak**

Whereas Britain First utilised most aspects of Facebook's functionality, video hosting platforms appeared less of a priority. In 2013, YouTube was definitively the group's main video hosting platform. In May, capitalising on the death of Lee Rigby, BF issued a video "arrest warrant" for Anjem Choudary, attempting to find his address, which subsequently went viral (Hope Not Hate, 2014). In November 2013, as BF began using Facebook, they also used the page to direct followers to their YouTube content. Videos were often shared to Facebook as direct links to YouTube itself. Between April and July 2014, BF also posted links to 15 videos from Jim Dowson's YouTube account, primarily to promote and fundraise for the party's European campaign and publicise online shop.

From January 2014, Britain First began to move to LiveLeak, an alternative unmoderated video hosting platform specialising in uncensored, controversial primary-source content. LiveLeak had previously gained notoriety in 2007 for broadcasting footage of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's execution; subsequently, the platform was denounced by Tony Blair as a propaganda weapon for insurgent fighters, who began sharing images depicting the "reality of war" in Iraq (Crichton, 2007). LiveLeak came under further scrutiny in 2014 when it was reported that the murder of American journalist James Foley by Islamic State

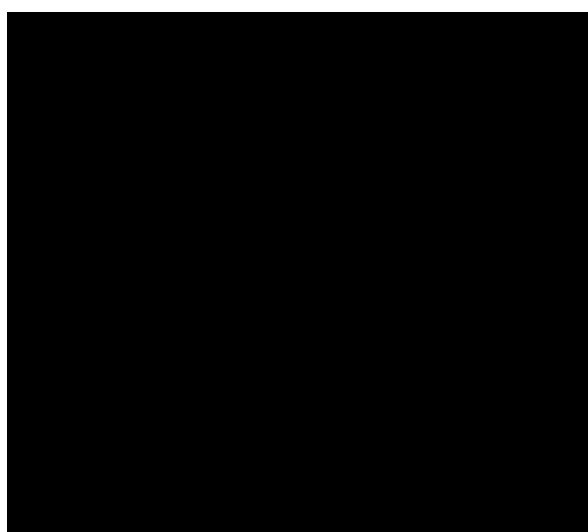
fighters had been hosted as a LiveLeak video. In response, LiveLeak announced its intention to ban users from posting footage of IS executions (Nelson, 2014). BF's own LiveLeak account, BRITAINFIRSTVIDEOS, hosted videos of direct action and campaigning that were not initially shared to Facebook, focusing on the aggressive aspects of the group's campaign. This included confronting Anjem Choudhary and Abu Izzadeen at their residences at night and carrying out Christian Patrols in areas of "heavily Muslim" or "Islamified" East London. The group shared LiveLeak video links 108 times between February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, roughly 2.9 percent of posts in that period.

Eventually, Britain First stopped using LiveLeak as Facebook began to dominate their social media. From February 2015, BF only linked once to LiveLeak through until 2016. Instead, they increasingly relied on Facebook native video. In 2013, BF had posted just one Facebook native video. In 2014, this increased to 195, or 16.25 per month. By 2015, output exploded threefold to 704, or 58.6 per month. In 2016, this more than doubled again to 1503, or 125.25 per month. By contrast, BF only linked to YouTube in 50 posts out of 27,200 (0.18 percent) from March 2015 to December 2016. In total, only approximately 0.259 percent of the Facebook corpus linked to BF's YouTube channel (96 posts in total), whereas 8.43 percent of video was Facebook-native. This likely reflected an organic shift in video content strategy in response to Facebook's functionality changes, which began to algorithmically prioritise native video, prevent non-native video auto-play (Luckerson, 2014) and prevent video hosting sites embedding in posts, to push users to Facebook's native video hosting (Gielen, 2017).

Instead of using YouTube's distinct operating objectives, popularity and algorithmic advantages to engage new constituencies and build up a channel of complementary but unique content, these video-sharing sites instead serviced the group's Facebook community and website visitors, as the platform continued to be used as the de facto video hosting platform for their website. However, due to the nature of their content, BF often risked censorship or

suspension from YouTube. As such, the group also used PewTube as a backup in the event of account lockouts, bans or video removal. PewTube itself has been described as ‘alt-tech’ (deliberately evocative of the term ‘alt-right’) for communities suspended from mainstream social media platforms for violating user codes of conduct. Ostensibly, these platforms claim to provide a space that is “creator friendly” and uncensored but have also been criticized for encouraging hate speech and inciting hatred (PewTube, 2017; Malter, 2017). In November 2014, for instance, Google temporarily suspended the Britain First YouTube account (fig. 5.29). Similarly, in early 2018, whilst their YouTube account was inaccessible, the Britain First website’s video tab directed to PewTube.

Unlike the group’s Facebook page (both in terms of total output and video output specifically), Britain First’s video platform output did not increase significantly each year. In 2014, the group posted 66 videos to YouTube across their Britain First and British Fight Back channels, which almost doubled in 2015 to 111 in total, but then decreased by almost a third to 75 in 2016. This was despite rebranding videos with distinctive visual identities at the beginning and end and the broadening of content to signpost video series such as ‘Jayda’s Soapbox’. Otherwise, the group did relatively little to promote their video channels through Facebook.



(Fig. 5.29)

Fundamentally, the different uses for each platform implies either an understanding of the unique advantages of each platform and/or an organic response to changes in algorithms and functionality. Prioritising Facebook, for instance, allowed the group to post a variety of different content daily (and, eventually, almost hourly). By contrast, posting video content at a rate of twice a week at to YouTube presented an inconsistent and much less resource efficient way of community-building given YouTube’s video-only functionality. Moreover, YouTube content did not lend itself to immediate ‘shareability’ as with Facebook. Beyond the blocking of embedding, YouTube users cannot share content to personal feeds as Facebook, Twitter or even LinkedIn users can to owned profiles. As noted, BF’s Facebook content often incorporated specific calls to action to “SHARE and LIKE” to maximise reach and engagement and encourage individual follower networks to navigate to the page and expand the community further. YouTube, by contrast, does not enable similar functions of engagement and direct endorsement of content to promote content to other users. Engagement through Facebook and Twitter, through likes, shares and replies, increases the likelihood similar content disseminating to like-minded followers in the first place. By contrast, YouTube’s algorithm instead, for instance, promotes videos to other users based on factors such as ‘view velocity’ (the likelihood of users viewing other YouTube content after viewing a video) and immediate rate of views after upload (Gielen, 2017). Moreover, Juniper Downs, YouTube’s Global Head of Public Policy and Government Relations, recently told MPs that YouTube’s algorithm also demotes clickbait, such as content with fully capitalised titles and salacious thumbnails (House of Commons, DCMS Committee, 2018). As such, YouTube community growth was dependent on numerous factors outside BF’s control relative to Facebook.

Indeed, recycling content optimised for one platform to use on other platforms can be observed across comparable political Facebook pages, and indeed, Britain First were not outliers in this. Both the Conservatives and Labour similarly reuse content across both Twitter

and Facebook, for instance, due to limited resources and time, either by necessity or through business decisions, to spend on digital outreach and communications. That is not to say, however, that general-purpose content is desirable. Matthew Oczkowski, Head of Product at Cambridge Analytica who worked on the Trump presidential campaign, described modern political communications as “platform agnostic” (2017). For Trump, Oczkowski directed campaigns directed at demographics that American conservatives had typically struggled to reach and used different platforms and distinct messaging with these demographics in mind. Snapchat, for instance, allowed Trump to demonstrate the scale of his “Make America Great Again” movement with content stylised as “raw footage” and “behind the scenes”. Rather, BF’s cross-platform use of content was likely driven by expediency and cost effectiveness.

Unlike Facebook, almost all video content shared by Britain First was produced by the group itself. This was likely because YouTube, unlike Facebook, does not lend itself to content such as the immigrant and Muslim ‘witnessing’ videos (discussed below) decontextualised from other BF content. The only video not produced by or for the group specifically was a full reproduction of the *Vice* documentary *London’s Holy Turf War*, which examined BF’s campaign against Anjem Choudhary in depth. The one change made to this video was a caption that disavowed far right hooliganism at the sentencing of Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale, the killers of Lee Rigby. The documentary implicitly linked BF to this hooliganism, as they were shown at the march where it occurred; BF used subtitles to categorically deny this.

Videos often took more drastic stances on aspects of the group’s ideology. The majority of videos posted across all video platforms conveyed either nativist or nationalistic themes. 169 of the 195 videos published to YouTube included nativist themes, amounting to 86.6 percent of output compared to 52.8 percent for Facebook. Similarly, 150 videos included nationalistic themes, amounting to 76.92 percent compared to Facebook’s modest 19.9 percent.

127 of these videos, or 65.12 percent, also featured direct action, electoral or street-based campaigning through their Christian patrols, mosque invasions and outreach events. Furthermore, over 11 percent of YouTube videos included anti-globalist themes compared to 7 percent on Facebook, whilst 58.97 percent of videos included anti-establishment themes, compared to 14.1 percent of Facebook. Moreover, 22.05 percent of videos included socially conservative themes, compared to a paltry 2.6 percent of Facebook posts. The long-form nature of video, relative to images, links and statuses, clearly allowed for Britain First to display a breadth of ideological themes.

### **Responding to Facebook's algorithm**

When looking at the mediums through which ideological content was disseminated and how group-building occurred, Britain First clearly responded to changes in algorithmic arrangements. Whether this was a conscious reorientation of their digital strategy based on proactive engagement with these changes or an organic response to what worked at the time within the context of the UK political landscape is debatable. Indeed, depending on the medium, both explanations seem to be correct. BF often experimented with new features and used dynamic methods to deliver content in different ways, particularly in the case of live video, Facebook events and an early reliance on images. However, when it came to other mediums, such as video and link usage, general trends seem to suggest they otherwise responded organically to what was working and what was not over time rather than making conscious and/or drastic changes to their content strategy.

#### **- Designing for a visual platform**

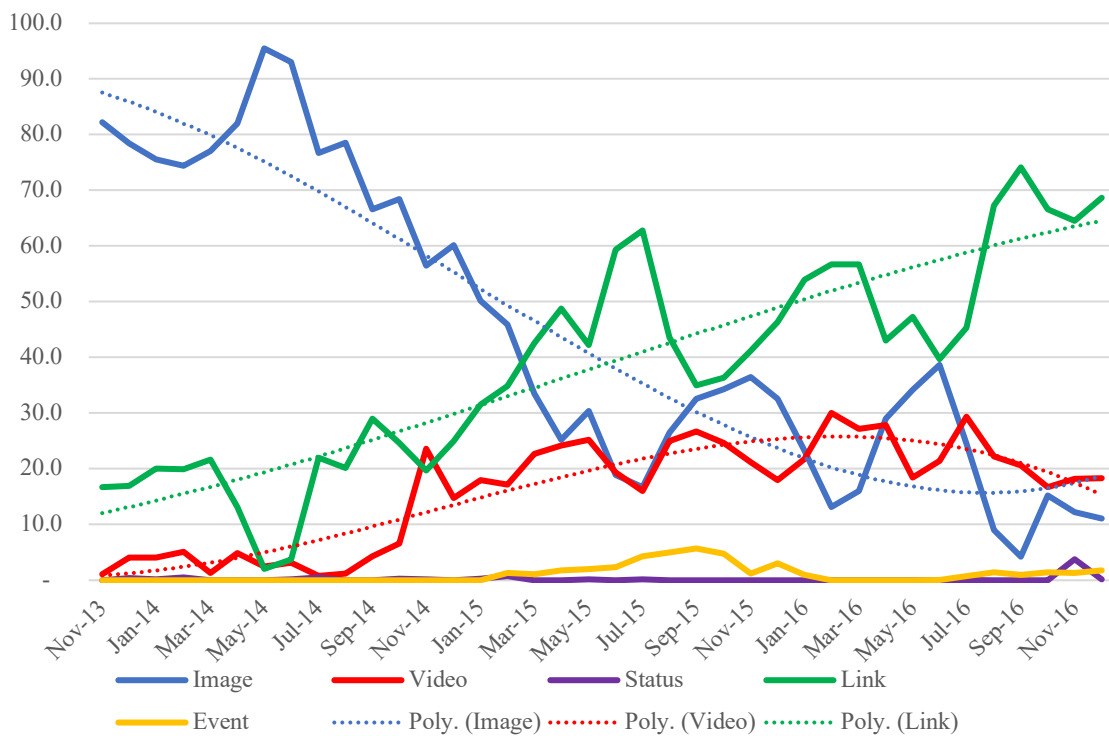
In terms of using multimedia, Britain First were clearly ahead of the curve. In January 2014, Facebook announced that pages should “expect a decrease in the distribution of their text status updates” and an increase in distribution and engagement of other post types (Turitzin, 2014). In fact, since starting their page in mid-2013, BF had only posted 5 text-only statuses in 1,454 posts between August 2013 and January 2014, accounting for only 0.34 percent of total output during that time. Indeed, the only month that saw a significant number of text-based updates was November 2016, where 52 posts were text-only. 48 of these were live updates of the US presidential election, as the group were heavily invested in a Trump victory. Notably, November 2016 alone accounted for exactly two thirds of BF’s 78 status updates for the entire corpus. However, this practice was unique to the presidential election; for the 301 live updates for the EU Referendum in June, BF accompanied each result with a simple image of the Union Flag. The difference can likely be attributed to not finding an adequate graphic to accompany the election results and not wanting to use the American flag so prominently for so many posts.

Rather, at least initially, Britain First were heavily reliant on images to stand out against the noise and communicate effectively to followers. For 2013, just over 80 percent of posts incorporated images, including 100 percent of posts (though this was ‘only’ 42 total) in October 2013, which was the first month of consistent posting, and 82.2 percent of content in November (fig. 5.30). For the first half of 2014, this average improved to 83.4 percent of posts (2661 of 3189, up from 80.9 percent between August and December 2013) (fig. 5.31). April, May and June incorporated images in 82, 95.5 percent and 93 percent of posts respectively. Images included photos, group icons, bespoke web graphics (of varying degrees of quality), memes using the distinctive ‘Impact’ typeface (Edwards, 2015), and copies of Britain First leafletting material. These often were easy to produce, of relatively low quality or were reposted from other sources to maximise quantity of output for minimal effort; images were also reused



several times a month over the course of several months. Images were also used to provide emphasis for links, such as to the website, online store and petition campaigns, by including said links as captions on the picture itself to take advantage of Facebook's weighting for image content.

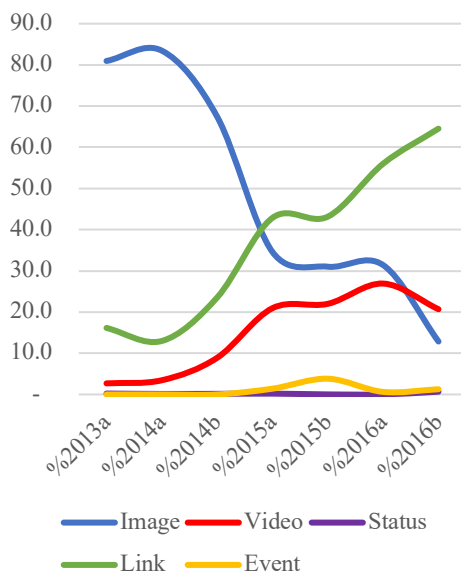
(Fig. 5.30): percentage of monthly output by medium on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016



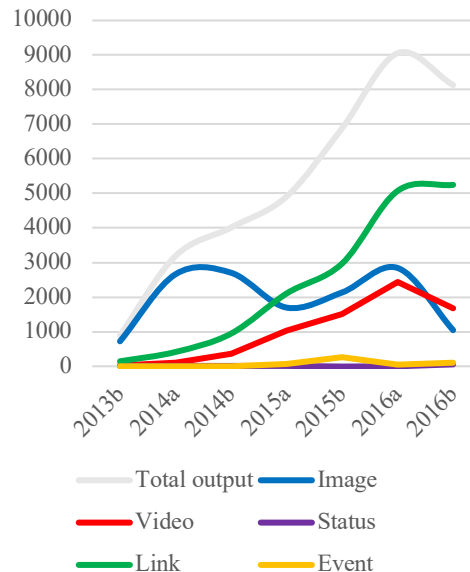
From mid-2014, the proportion of image posts began to decrease. This decline in overall proportion did not equate to a decline in the total amount of image content used, but rather an expansion in the total amount of output driven by other multimedia content as Britain First began to experiment more with video content and link sharing. In either case, this was a logical response to another algorithm change. In December 2013, Facebook announced it would be prioritising news-based content over memes in 2014 (Kacholia and Ji, 2013; Beck, 2015). For the second half of 2014, for example, the average fell to 67.4 percent; the same period actually saw an increase in total image content (2705 posts compared to 2661 from

January to June 2014), but at the same time, total output increased by a greater proportion to 4,012 from 3,189. The proportion of image-based content sharply declined thereafter but then stayed somewhat consistent. Overall, the total proportion for the subsequent 18 months was 32 percent and the 6-month averages over this time were 34.6 percent, 31 percent and 31.4 percent respectively. By the end of 2016, the proportion of image use collapsed further and almost dropped off completely, with the 6-month average being 12.9 percent, corresponding to a drastic overall fall of 1,045 total image posts from 2,843 (despite a decrease in total output to 8,131 from 9,054).

(Fig. 5.31): percentage of six month output by medium on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016



(Fig. 5.32): proportion of six month output by medium on Britain First's Facebook page, August 2013 to December 2016



## - Pivot to video

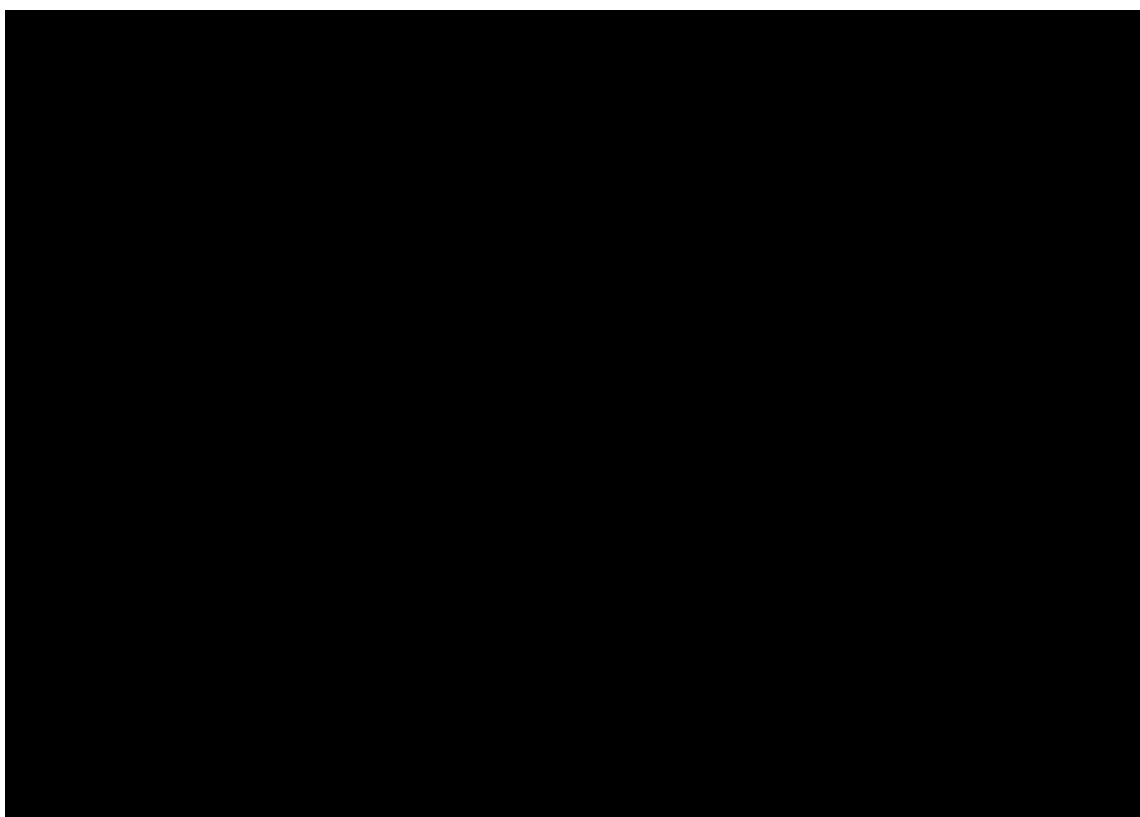
In response to video views doubling since the beginning of 2014, Facebook announced in June 2015 that algorithms would be prioritising video for those that consumed video often (Beck, 2015). As such, native Facebook video would also begin to account for metrics such as

whether a person had watched a video, view duration and audience retention, in addition to previous metrics such as likes, comments and shares (Beck, 2014; Welch and Zhang, 2014). On June 12<sup>th</sup>, Facebook announced algorithms would also consider time spent looking at posts as a signal and start to surface more content that users interacted with in this way, and on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, further stated that it would be including similar metrics to video posts, such as audio activation rates, user volume increase, rate of expands to full screen and enabling high definition, as indicators of engagement (Yu and Tas, 2015; Wang and Zhuo, 2015).

Comparing this to Britain First's Facebook data, we can see a corresponding shift towards using video content in the wake of the algorithm change. From August to December 2013, the proportion of video content was 2.7 percent of 892 posts published in this time frame (fig.5.31). From January to June 2014, this marginally increased to 3.4 percent of the total 3,189 posts and from July to October stayed relatively consistent at 3.1 percent across 2,477 posts. In November, however, the proportion of video increased drastically to 23.6 percent from 6.6 percent in October (fig. 5.30). From November, the proportion of video remained relatively consistent, with the average for the next two years from January 2015 to December 2016 being 22.2 percent of 28,975 posts. The lowest subsequent month for video was December 2014 with 14.8 percent; the highest, meanwhile, was February 2016 with 30 percent. The breakdowns over that span was 20.9 percent on average between January and June 2015, 22 percent on average between July and December 2015, 26.9 percent between January and June 2016 and 20.7 percent between July and December 2016, demonstrating a broad increase until the latter part of 2016 (fig. 5.31).

This pivot to video meant that the type of videos Britain First posted changed too. On the one hand, the group experimented with episodic content. One of these was 'Jayda's Soapbox', though the leadership also experimented with other formats, such as several videos in a 'breaking news' broadcast style featuring Fransen, Golding and others as straightforward

interviews. Typically, episodes would range from topics such as ‘explainers’ on Islamic scripture, ‘analysis’ of current political events and updates on recent Britain First activity, including run-ins with the authorities at marches, ideological takes on current events and group announcements, such as the Luton High Court Injunction and other legal cases. Almost all of these were filmed against a green screen and made use of animated background effects to create a consistent, recognisable visual identity. From August 2015, BF published 46 episodes of these videos, which were shared several times each.



(Left to right, top to bottom: figs. 5.33, 5.34, 5.35, 5.36, 5.37 and 5.38)

Britain First also posted a number of videos from other sources alongside direct-action videos. The most significant recurring type of video formed part of a nativist ‘witnessing’ campaign against Muslim people and people of colour. These videos exclusively depicted non-white people, often framed to be of Islamic faith and/or migrants in Europe, as the source of

criminal and anti-social behaviour or engaging in violent acts or othering cultural practices. This ranged from videos of people: committing crimes, such as stealing from or assaulting white bystanders, and acts of public disorder; engaging in cultural practices framed as alien, aggressive and incompatible with Western society, such as self-flagellation or gender-based segregation; and, in extreme instances, committing acts of terror (figs. 5.33-5.38). From June 2016, BF posted 548 of these videos, which comprised 26.19 percent of all video and 5.45 percent of all posts in this time. Such videos were then used to legitimise extreme nativist policies, such as forced repatriation, ending immigration, rejecting refugees and suppressing expressions of Muslim faith.

Both proportionately and nominally, video use peaked during the first half of 2016 (figs. 5.31 and 5.32). Though proportionately these months were only 4 percent higher than peaks for other months, such as September and October 2015, in absolute terms this amounted to roughly 100 more videos (with 417 and 410 in February and June 2016 compared to 313 and 311 in September and October 2015 respectively). Alongside anti-migrant and Islamoprejudiced ‘witnessing’ content, videos posted in these months were also key to Britain First’s London Mayoral elections, Greater London Assembly and EU Referendum campaigns. For the London elections, between February and April, this included videos of leafletting and campaigning on the ground, a television election broadcast that was shared several times, and Islamoprejudiced smears against Sadiq Khan. Following the election results in May, there was a more muted Facebook video presence, and the video total fell to 284 and proportion to 18.5 percent because of this. However, the group soon resumed posting anti-Khan videos shortly after.

At the end of 2016, it also emerged that Britain First had backed this campaign with targeted Facebook advertising. According to invoices received and published by the Electoral Commission, BF spent at least £6,000 in targeted Facebook advertising to reach potential

voters with their published video content. In an article published in December 2016, Jim Waterson, *Buzzfeed*'s UK political editor, reported that this generated over 3.3 million views (though this had a negligible effect on actual vote share, as Paul Golding only received 1.2 percent of votes with 31,372 in the mayoral election<sup>13</sup>) (2016b; see also BBC, 2016). BF had been experimenting with targeted advertising since at least April 2015, based on a screenshot provided by a member of the public on Twitter (2016b). This is unsurprising: in March 2014, Facebook tweaked its algorithmic logic to reduce the organic reach of Facebook pages from 2 percent to 1 percent (Dutta, 2018) and in November 2014 announced it would be surfacing fewer “overly promotional” organic posts (Beck, 2015). Both of these updates clearly incentivised paid advertising relative to organic reach. This suggests that BF's pivot to video was a function of a content strategy that at least was compatible or influenced with algorithm changes, if not in direct response to them.

In June and July 2016, the group posted several videos in the lead up to and aftermath of the EU referendum, which caused video to peak again in these months. Again, this involved videos of street-based campaigning on behalf of the Leave campaign (though they were not affiliated any Leave campaign group). In July, they also posted retrospective analyses on the result of the referendum, on the EU and Eurozone itself and on the Conservative Party leadership election (in which they endorsed Andrea Leadsom, a socially conservative backbench MP backing a hard Brexit, over eventual winner Theresa May, whom they portrayed as a socially liberal, pro-Islam representative of the political establishment). Finally, they also posted several videos regarding the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox in the lead up to the vote at the end of June. In the immediate aftermath of Thomas Mair's attack on Cox outside of a constituency surgery and her subsequent death, it was widely reported that Mair shouted

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<sup>13</sup> However, Golding received considerably more than the BNP (0.5 percent with 13,325 votes), roughly equal to George Galloway (1.4 percent with 37,007) and a third of those for UKIP (3.6 percent with 94,373). Furthermore, the election was defined by two frontrunners who dominated the voter share in Sadiq Khan and Zac Goldsmith, who received a combined 79.2 percent with 2,058,471 first preference votes (BBC, 2016).

“Britain First” (Nazia, Pidd and Booth, 2016; Rayner, Mendick and Evans, 2016). In response, the group used Facebook to release several statements from Fransen and Golding refuting these allegations, professing sympathy to Cox’s family and denouncing violence against “democratically elected officials”. The latter was particularly egregious as the group often posted content framing British politicians as traitors and threatening violence against them before and after this incident. Indeed, 3 months later on September 29<sup>th</sup>, Paul Golding stated that “Tony Blair should be strung up from the nearest lamppost and executed as a traitor to his own country”.

#### **- Links as content**

From December 2013, Facebook also adjusted the distribution of shared links. In December, a related article feature that suggested similar content in conjunction was implemented alongside an update on the story bumping feature (Dutta, 2018). In January 2014, Facebook encouraged users to make use of the native link platform to publish links, rather than trying to ‘game’ the News Feed by taking advantage of the algorithm’s preference for images and incorporating links in image captions (Turitzin, 2014; see also Beck, 2015). In an announcement by Facebook’s Khalid El-Arini and Joyce Tang, the link preview better allowed users to decide if they wanted to click through to the article and improved functionality for mobile users (2014). Simultaneously, Facebook announced link headlines that were “click-baiting” user engagement would be deprioritised (El-Arini and Tang, 2014). Metrics used to identify clickbait were speculated to be high bounce rates (users immediately clicking away from a link) and a high click rates relative to post engagement. In September, members of Facebook’s engineering team added that the algorithm would factor in timeliness when

deciding on content to promote and claimed that early testing had yielded a 6 percent increase in engagement (Owens and Vickrey, 2014).

Overall, Britain First's total and proportionate use of links without accompanying multimedia increased consistently from November 2013 (when they first started using links as a primary medium) through to December 2016. From November 2013 to March 2014, the proportion of link usage varied between 16.7 percent to 21.6 percent and increased consistently in this time. From July 2014 to December 2014, that proportion varied between 19.7 percent and 29 percent, with a general but inconsistent overall increase. Between January and May 2015, the proportion varied between 31.6 percent and 48.8 percent; between June and December 2015, varied between 35 percent and 62.8 percent; from January and July 2016 varied between 39.8 percent and 56.8 percent; and from August to December 2016 varied between 64.5 percent and 74.1 percent. The period between June 2015 and July 2016 were most volatile in increases and decreases by proportion of native link usage, and analytically, it might not add value separating the two periods. In any case, both can be characterised by a two to three-month peak followed by a four to five-month trough. These 13 months perhaps demonstrate that, whilst BF were using a significant proportion of links relative to their output, they were also committed to increasing the amount of video; during these troughs for link usage, proportion of video output peaked notably.

As with video content, there appears to be a delay between changes to algorithms arrangements and responses in output. The first announcements in December 2013 and January 2014 appear to have only minimally impacted link usage and did not offset the significant trough in May and June 2014. Similarly, the announcement in September 2014 had minimal impact at the time and did not prevent another trough in November. Instead, the increase in proportion of links seemed to begin in July 2014, with significant monthly increases occurring from February to March 2015, April to June 2015 and July to August 2016.



Unlike video content, however, link content did not fall towards the end of 2016 and may even have caused the proportionate downward trend in video. Between July to December 2016, the average rate of link sharing was 64.5 percent, and monthly link sharing rates from August to December were 67.3 percent for August 2016, 74.1 percent for September, 66.6 percent October, 64.5 percent November and 68.7 percent December. This increase was underpinned by additional sources of linked content from affiliated or similar far-right websites. The most significant of these were Christian Fightback, Counter Jihad News and Patriot News Hub, which Britain First started sharing from mid-August. Furthermore, BF began sharing content directly from Fransen's own website rather than her Facebook page. In total, these links numbered 2,877 posts in total, which comprised 61.8 percent of all links (4,653 total) and 42.1 percent of all posts (6,822 total) for August to December 2016. Though link subject varied, typical story themes included pro-Brexit anti-globalism, political radicalism and nativism, as well as political advocacy for Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán.

Whilst Britain First committed to this type of content, the purpose of link-sharing appeared to be varied. In the case of promoting petitions, websites and other owned channels, and links to donations and the online shop, BF pushed traffic to these platforms with various implicit or explicit calls to action by urging people to read blog posts or buy merchandise. Similarly, in sharing affiliated links such as Patriot News Hub, BF used its considerable profile to boost the exposure of these websites. Another dimension of link sharing was to share articles that referenced Britain First. This included news stories from the mainstream media that referred to the group as far right or were otherwise critical of the group. These articles were often framed in the accompanying post text as "more media lies", though otherwise simply referenced as "more publicity". Indeed, such posts, alongside social media and website analytics (which recorded the number of follows, engagements and hits) from Facebook

Insights and other analytics platforms, were presented as sources of legitimisation for BF and its strategy. Finally, Britain First often shared links to news stories, blog posts and channels about politics, current events and other similar subjects. These articles justified political agendas, ideologies and campaigns the group espoused, supported and organised. However, such uses were largely (though not necessarily) beneficial as Facebook's algorithmic arrangements supported and promoted the use of links, but similarly, BF were only able to use such links because their Facebook profile made them worth writing about and the broader political culture in many ways facilitated the political positions they held.

#### **- Using new features**

From February 2015, Britain First began experimenting with using their page to create public Facebook events as an additional way to publicise activities alongside posters and video announcements. From February 2015, 450 of their posts were events, which amounted to 1.59 percent of posts, though this amounted to over 19 posts per month to promote 14 individual events across 23 months in total. The first event they used this method for was their 2015 Britannia Ball, which they posted about 12 times. From March to May 2015, they used events to publicise street campaigns for the first time for their 'No More Mega Mosques' march in Dudley. In total, the event was shared 25 times. From May 2015 to January 2016, they publicised several other public marches and party events, including marches in Luton against 'hate preachers', in Rotherham for "justice for the victims of grooming", in Burton against the 'mega mosque', and in Dewsbury for "justice for the victims of Islamic extremism", as well as for the 2015 party conference and launch of their 'London's Last Stand' election campaigns. However, between February and May, during their extensive campaign for the London elections, they stopped using Facebook events at all despite using them to announce the

campaign proper, perhaps due to their intention to focus on traditional campaigning methods rather than street protests and demonstrations. From June, they once again used events to promote meetings in Coventry, South Wales and London and the 2016 party conference. Moreover, a single event post publicised Fransen’s trial in Luton in October and a protest in Telford “exposing Muslum grooming gangs” in December. Without survey data from the events themselves, it is impossible to say how many attendants found the event function useful or even were prompted by it in the first place; at any rate, relative to the number of followers Britain First had by 2015 and throughout 2016, the response rate to Facebook events were marginal despite the group’s best efforts to promote them.

In August 2015, Product Manager Vadim Lavrusik introduced Facebook’s live video streaming capability, Facebook Live, for public figures, and in December 2015, the rollout was expanded to include verified Facebook pages, including Britain First (Lavrusik, 2015a; Lavrusik, 2015b). In December, Facebook also announced it would be testing live video for a small number of US users (Lavrusik and Tran, 2015), which then went live for all users in April 2016. Though BF did not immediately begin using Facebook Live, they began experimenting with it towards the end of 2016. In November, they posted 9 live videos; in December, they posted one more. During this time, their use of Facebook live was notably basic: the entirety of the video would focus on the image of a single ideological or policy statement with a positive and negative reaction counter that changed with the number of positive and negative reactions the post of the live video received. Questions posed to followers included: “should halal slaughter be banned?”; “should Britain ban the burkha?”; “should MPs who fiddle their expenses be sent to prison?”; “should England have its own Parliament?”; and “should England and Scotland withdraw from FIFA over their poppy ban?”. Rather than achieving any meaningful or shareable communications, engagement or mobilisation objective, these groups likely ascertained the reach and reception live videos could get, given

that page followers automatically opt-in to receiving notifications when pages they follow begin a live video. Indeed, the 9 live videos published in November received 223,452 reactions, 91,438 comments and 17,948 shares, which was 17.03 percent and 34.98 percent of total reactions and comments respectively across all posts for the month (but only 5.53 percent of total shares).



## Concluding remarks

Britain First's social media accounts provide interesting insights into the broader use of social media by the radical right. Clearly, non-emancipatory, non-progressive and often non-democratic politics did not preclude Facebook success. Rather, BF successfully maximised their potential reach by conforming to Facebook's algorithmic arrangements and using paid advertising. Given their large following, there was obviously an online constituency sympathetic to their propaganda, which led to increased exposure and finance. One downside,

however, was their focus on Facebook at the expense of video hosting, perhaps due to Facebook's superior functionality for movement-building and mobilisation. The following chapters shall first apply similar quantitative analysis of social media for UKIP, before turning to the qualitative study.

## Chapter 6

### UKIP Quantitative Analysis

#### Introduction

Whilst UKIP has not been associated with social media as strongly as Britain First has, several articles in the media have nonetheless described the party as “winning” on Facebook relative to the established political parties (Perraudin, 2014). First, this chapter shall provide an overview of UKIP’s official Facebook content. This section shall begin with a brief examination of the party’s most engaging content, key ideological positions and use of multimedia. Second, UKIP’s YouTube strategies shall be examined, focusing on three accounts: UKIP’s Official Channel, its MEPs channel, and the Europarl channel, a ‘sister channel’ to UKIP MEPs. Each channel was used early on to host a variety of outputs, before becoming increasingly narrow in focus. The third section shall provide yearly breakdowns of UKIP Facebook data. The final section shall analyse UKIP’s use of Facebook to communicate with and mobilise its online following. Unlike BF, the party did not rely on social media for funding, even when its financial position diminished.

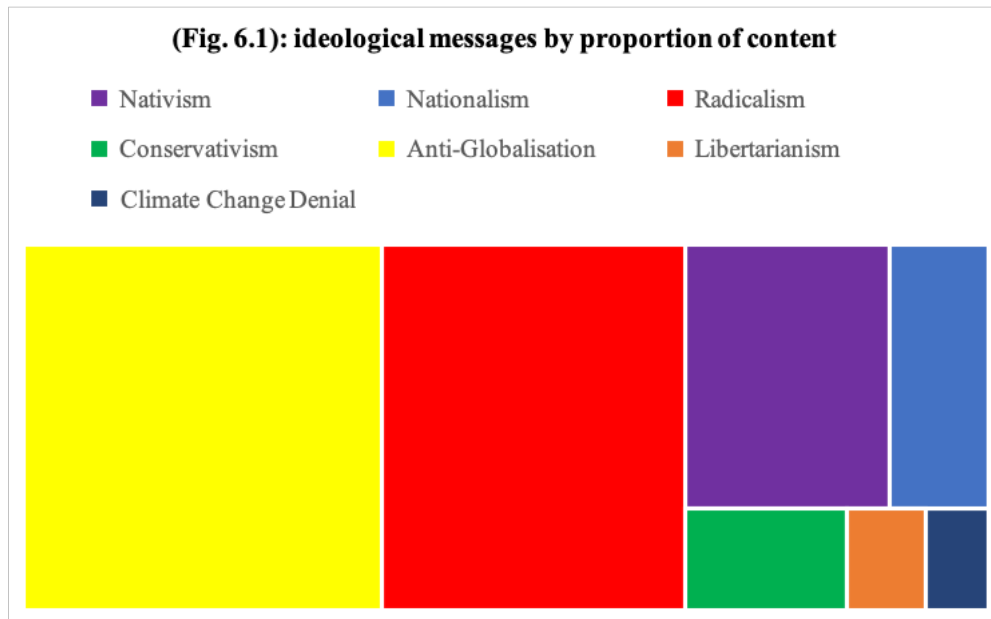
#### Facebook – Overall Analysis

Overall, UKIP’s approach to Facebook was uneven. Of the top 100 posts published ranked by the number of reactions, a significant proportion had little or nothing to do with advocating ideological positions or policy platforms, movement-building or generating financial support. Simple ‘thank you’ posts to supporters after campaigns or upon achieving

milestones occurred 23 times, including 9 times in the top 20. A further six were generic well-wishing posts for St. George's Day, including the second-most engaging post, which achieved over 46,500 reactions and 12,800 shares. Three posts were updates that the party had changed its cover photo (one being an aforementioned 'thank you for voting UKIP' banner following their European elections, which received over 19,000 reactions). Finally, six posts were from or about Nigel Farage. One post, for example, promoted Nigel Farage's personal Facebook page, one wished him a happy birthday, and two were clickbait-style posts that stated "[a]fter Question Time this evening, share if Nigel Farage MEP represents you" and "UKIP Leader Nigel Farage tops poll as the UK's most popular party leader. Spread the word!". In total, over a third of posts were of this type.

Though a significant proportion did advocate UKIP's policy agenda, one recurring theme throughout the corpus was that the majority did not cover a breadth of issues, but rather focused specifically on several key messages. Indeed, the top 100 posts were emblematic of this trend. 24 of the top 100 referenced the party's opposition to the UK's membership of the EU in some fashion, be it campaigning for a referendum prior to 2015, campaigning for the 'leave' side after the referendum was announced, or otherwise emphasising perceived impacts of EU membership. 19 of these same 100 posts advocated tougher laws, tighter restrictions and quotas against foreign-born UK residents, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Finally, 14 posts were coded as *anti-establishment*, articulating party opposition to established political parties (10 posts), British political institutions (4 posts) and mainstream media broadcasters (2 posts).

#### **- Advocating political positions**



Naturally, given their broader appeal, UKIP used their Facebook platform to emphasise different political positions than Britain First (figure 6.1). From the entire corpus, UKIP's Facebook content was coded most frequently as either demonstrating *anti-globalisation* and/or *anti-establishment* themes. Comparing these positions to polling data helps explain why each political position was represented in such quantity and how each comprised UKIP's social media strategy. Specifically, both *anti-establishment* and *anti-globalisation* content reflected and supported the party's core messages, if not necessarily the opinions of prospective voters.

In total, 35.8 percent of their total posts between 2011 and 2016 were coded by *anti-globalisation* themes, which was the largest single ideological position represented by the corpus. Unsurprisingly, anti-globalisation content was primarily Eurosceptic in nature, though UKIP also exhibited opposition to other supranational organisations, such as the United Nations, and transnational corporations. In total, 98.1 percent of *anti-globalisation*-coded content, and 35.2 percent of all Facebook posts in the corpus, was Eurosceptic equalling 2,181 total posts. Given UKIP's origins as a Eurosceptic pressure group, this is unsurprising. However, research from Lord Ashcroft in 2012 suggested that, though leaving the European Union was the party's primary purpose, only 27 percent of prospective UKIP voters believed



that ‘resolving Britain’s future relations with the European Union’ was among the top three most important issues facing the country (Ashcroft, 2012b). In 2016, a YouGov survey found that leaving the EU was only the second most selected issue respondents felt were in the top three facing the country, selected by 64 percent of people, after immigration, which selected by 84 percent (2016: 2). Furthermore, the poll found that 87 percent of UKIP voters felt that the party should not disband once Britain had left the European Union (2016: 10). Rather than reflecting attitudes of potential voters and new recruits, as is often suggested in the amorphous, ‘bottom-up’ movements conceptualised by techno-optimists, the UKIP Facebook page predominantly presented the views of the party leadership.

UKIP’s *anti-establishment*-coded content, meanwhile, represented 30.4 percent of posts from 2011 to 2016. Referring back to polling data, consistent criticism of the traditional political parties did resonate with opinions of prospective voters and members. From Lord Ashcroft’s research in 2012, 80 percent of people considering voting UKIP agreed to some degree that “[t]he bigger parties seem more interested in trendy nonsense than listening to ordinary people”, compared to just 4 percent who disagreed (Ashcroft, 2012a). Similarly, 72 percent of people in the same study agreed to some degree that they were “disappointed with the bigger parties and voting UKIP is a good way to register a protest” compared to 9 percent that disagreed (Ashcroft, 2012a). Finally, 65 percent of people agreed that “the party [they] used to vote for has lost touch with its traditional supporters like me” compared to just 8 percent who disagreed (Ashcroft, 2012a). This anti-establishment sentiment endured throughout the period. YouGov, for instance, found that UKIP supporters in 2016 overwhelmingly believed that “[t]he mainstream media as a whole has been deliberately biasing coverage to portray UKIP in a negative manner”, with 89 percent of people responding that it was either definitely or probably true (67 percent for the former, 22 percent for the latter) compared on only 7 percent who considered it untrue (2016: 13). Furthermore, 55 percent of the same group

considered true that “[s]ome UKIP members have been planted by Conservative strategists to undermine the party” compared to 31 percent who considered it untrue. Indeed, both the quantity of political and media scepticism amongst UKIP’s Facebook output and the opinions of voters clearly reflected Nigel Farage’s ubiquitous condemnation of political opponents and negative press as “the political class and their friends in the media” (Chakelian, 2014).

A significant proportion of UKIP’s posts were also coded as displaying *nativist* themes. In total, approximately 14.8 percent of UKIP’s content between 2011 and 2016 was coded as such. Primarily, this was due to anti-immigrant propaganda. Initially, opposition to migration was framed within the party’s opposition to the European Union’s principle of freedom of movement between member states, aimed primarily at Bulgarian and Romanian migrants. Towards the end of the period, however, UKIP’s anti-immigration rhetoric broadened, also including opposition to non-European refugees during the European migrant crisis that began in 2015. In total, approximately 92.2 percent of all nativist content displayed these themes, equalling roughly 13.7 percent of the corpus (847 posts from 918 *nativist*-coded posts or 6,204 total). Whilst UKIP’s nativist content was, from a quantitative perspective, decidedly third in terms of output, immigration was a key issue for prospective voters. Overall, “[c]ontrolling immigration” was chosen second-highest by prospective UKIP voters asked to select the top three issues facing the country with 52 percent, second only to “[g]etting the economy growing and creating jobs” with 68 percent in 2012 (Ashcroft, 2012b). By 2014, it was the single most cited issue with 72 percent (Ashcroft, 2014a). Similarly, prospective UKIP voters overwhelmingly agreed that both “[a] big UKIP vote would force the big parties to take notice of concerns about Europe and immigration” (85 percent net agreement, 87 percent total agreement) and with “UKIP’s policy on immigration” (78 percent net agreement, 80 percent total agreement) more broadly (Ashcroft, 2012a).

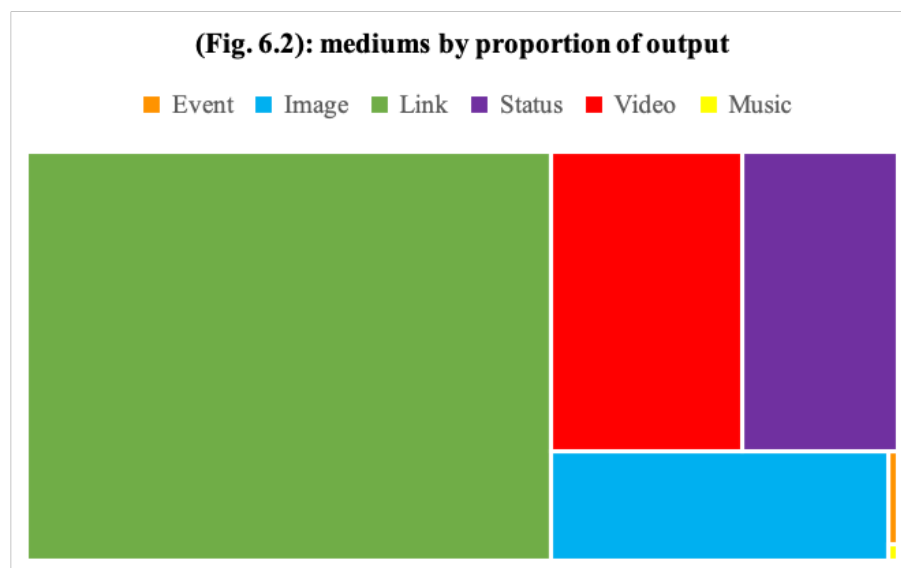
UKIP also published content that displayed Islamoprejudiced rhetoric. In total, 6.9 percent of *nativist*-coded posts exhibited Islamoprejudiced themes (64 out of 918 posts), which totalled just over one percent of the corpus. Over half of these posts published (34 out of 64 posts) occurred between January 2015 and December 2016, during the migrant crisis. Indeed, in 2012, 48 percent of prospective UKIP voters disagreed with the sentiment that “UKIP sometimes seem a bit racist”, though 18 percent agreed. However, 36 percent of the same group opined that the same sentiment was not important to their decision whether or not to vote UKIP, compared to 28 percent who did (Ashcroft, 2012a).

Though these themes occurred in a significant proportion of UKIP’s content, they were far from the only political positions their Facebook page advocated. 7.1 percent of posts were coded as *nationalist*, for example, whilst 4.5 percent advocated socially conservative policies. 2.2 percent were coded as *libertarian*, typically advocating free market (*laissez-faire*) capitalism and a minimal state, whilst 1.8 percent were coded as *climate change scepticism*. According to the public, UKIP’s ability to demonstrate breadth in political positions were mixed. Lord Ashcroft’s research in 2012 found that 58 percent of people did agree with the statement that “UKIP has policies I like in other areas”, whereas only 3 percent disagreed (Ashcroft, 2012a). That said, only 32 percent of prospective UKIP voters from the same study disagreed to some degree with the statement that the party “only seem to be interested in Europe, and don’t have policies in other important areas”, whereas 27 percent agreed (Ashcroft, 2012a). Furthermore, roughly 42 percent considered that same sentiment to be of some to significant importance in their decision “about whether or not to vote UKIP”, whilst only approximately 23 percent thought it not (Ashcroft, 2012a). When comparing these opinions to the corpus, UKIP did indeed post about a range of topics beyond their Euroscepticism. However, these were undeniably secondary to their core messages, and was reflected both by

the quantity of Facebook posts and the mixed opinion on how effective the party was at publicising these other positions from Lord Ashcroft's poll was clearly an issue more broadly.

### - The use of multimedia

As with Britain First, the majority of UKIP's content (over 86.7 percent of posts) were published with some form of multimedia. However, a significant minority of posts remained text-only; approximately 13.2 percent of all posts in the corpus were simple status updates (fig. 6.2), including roughly 16.8 percent of all posts from 2011 to 2014, or 780 posts overall. In total, this was almost ten times the proportion of BF's comparable posts. Indeed, the number of text-only posts was comparable to the number of video posts, which comprised 16 percent of the corpus with 992 posts, and both of these exceeded the proportion of image-based posts, which amounted to only 10.3 percent, or 639 posts, of the corpus.



Instead, the majority of UKIP's content were shared links to external sites (fig. 6.2). In total, approximately 72.7 percent of all posts and 83.9 percent of all multimedia posts incorporated links in some form or another. 60.1 percent of posts from 2011 to 2016 were categorised primarily as links by Facebook, which were visible to users as previews without

other accompanying multimedia, amounting to 3,730 posts. A further 12.6 percent of posts were links to external video platforms, such as YouTube, which Facebook categorised as video, or accompanied by other forms of multimedia, amounting to 783 posts.

A significant minority of posts were used to generate traffic to owned or affiliated websites. Links to these sites made up 1,409 posts, over 22.7 percent of output. These links served several purposes with various calls to action. The majority, 1,341 posts, aimed to push followers to UKIP's main site. This provided opportunities to publicise press releases and party news, notify followers to changes in party spokespeople (essentially mirroring the remits of cabinets and shadow cabinets in establishment parties) and other officers, and promote memberships to potential new joiners. Moreover, the page also linked to the UKIP MEPs website 28 times, to a separate membership portal 16 times, to regional UKIP websites (such as [ukipnw.org](http://ukipnw.org), [ukipwalsall.org](http://ukipwalsall.org) and [ukip.wales](http://ukip.wales)) 11 times, to donation or ticketing websites (such as [electmps-ukip](http://electmps-ukip)) 9 times, and to the UKIP youth wing, Young Independence, 4 times. By contrast, the paucity of links to these sites suggest that promoting these sites was not necessarily a significant part of any social media strategy.

Indeed, looking at the top ten UKIP-owned or affiliated links shared on Facebook by engagements demonstrates how varied these posts were. The foremost of these, which received over 23,700 likes, 2,480 comments and 2,300 shares, linked to a page thanking supporters for voting for the party in the 2015 UK general election, where UKIP received 12.1 percent of the vote and over 3,881,000 votes nationwide (BBC, 2015d). Two other posts were also party news updates, with one linking to a message from Suzanne Evans and another to a message from major party donor Alan Brown after Nigel Farage stepped down as leader of UKIP in 2015. Five of these related to political positions, including its criticism of the BBC and Labour party and opposition to taking refugees and allowing British Islamic State militants to return to the UK. Finally, one post, which was the second most popular, was part of the general election

campaign detailing UKIP's '5 pledges to Britain' on immigration, the EU, NHS, foreign aid and tax to "highlight quite how UKIP differs from the political establishment".

Beyond promoting their owned channels, UKIP also used a significant minority of their posts to share links from news articles. Typically, these articles covered UKIP's political campaigns and results, their work in local government, Parliament and assemblies, or comments from spokespeople on various issues. Often, these articles would also comment on UKIP generally, detailing and analysing the party's 'rise and rise' (Hayton, 2013), particularly between 2012 and 2015. Finally, as with Britain First, UKIP also to a lesser extent shared news stories that reinforced their political agenda. Similar to BF, UKIP favoured sharing articles right-wing and tabloid newspapers. Of the 924 articles shared from national newspapers, 761 articles (over 82 percent) were from papers that supported right wing parties or are otherwise perceived as right wing<sup>14</sup> by the British public. By contrast, just 157 articles (almost 17 percent) came from newspapers that identified or are perceived as liberal or left wing, though most articles featured coverage of UKIP's policies or party leadership, polling figures, or on high profile defections from other parties at all levels. 11 of the 62 *Guardian* articles, for example, referred to UKIP's position in the national polls, both locally and nationally, providing exposure on constituencies where UKIP were 'official opposition' or generating publicity whenever party polling improved.

Moreover, UKIP shared more articles from traditional tabloid papers than broadsheets. In total, 537 articles, equalling over 58.1 percent of articles from national papers, were from red tops, compared to 387 articles, over 41.8 percent, from broadsheets. Indeed, two of the three most shared outlets were tabloids. Of these three, the two newspapers that were shared the most by far were *The Telegraph* and *The Express*. Of the 924 articles from national newspapers, *The Telegraph*'s articles were shared the second most, 227 times, contributing to

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<sup>14</sup> From YouGov, examining 'How left or right-wing are the UK's newspapers?' (Smith, 2017).

almost a quarter of articles and over 58.6 percent of articles from broadsheets. This was over twice as many as the third most shared paper, *The Daily Mail*, which was shared 101 times. However, by comparison, the number of *Telegraph* articles was a distant second compared to the number of *Express* articles. In total, *The Express*'s articles were shared 391 times, totalling 42.3 percent of articles from national newspapers and over 6.3 percent of the entire corpus. Indeed, *The Express* was a consistent supporter of UKIP throughout the period. In December 2012, following a successful month in November in a number of by-elections, an article by Neil Hamilton declared that "Ukip's changed politics forever" (2012). In January 2014, prominent *Express* journalist Patrick O'Flynn stepped down from his position as chief political editor to join UKIP as director of communications and MEP candidate for the East of England (Banham, 2014). Ahead of the 2015 general election, the paper also "urged the British public to vote UKIP – 'Vote UKIP and for the first time you will be able to make a real difference'" and opined that "[a]ll of UKIP's policies on immigration, the NHS, taxation, public spending and Europe, which the Daily Express totally supports in the interests of its readers, resonate with the British public" (*Express*, 2015). Furthermore, the newspaper also provided Nigel Farage and other prominent party figures, such as Paul Nuttall and Paul Sykes, regular columns.

Given the breadth and depth of support, unsurprisingly a significant portion of UKIP's social media output was dedicated to sharing *The Express*'s content. Moreover, it is likely that the relationship between the party and paper was mutually beneficial, whether directly cultivated due to political similarities or indirectly responding to positive responses. *The Express*, at this time at least, would have provided the party with much-needed mainstream and traditional media exposure, the lack of which, as Ford, Goodwin and Cutts note, was a factor in UKIP's poor performance up to and including 2011 (2012; see also Murphy and Devine, 2018). UKIP, meanwhile, could potentially have similarly benefitted the paper by sharing

*Express* articles and op-eds from their own candidates in such quantity to its followers (who, by October 2012, totalled over 10,000) and thus increasing click-through rates that would then contribute to the paper's online advertising revenue.

UKIP also shared articles from a number of right-wing freesheets, magazines and regional newspapers. In total, these comprised over 100 posts. Though none of these outlets were individually shared in significant numbers, they provided a breadth of sources. Quantitatively the most significant of these sources were also the most prominent, right-wing outlets. The *Evening Standard*, for instance, was shared 18 times, whilst the *Spectator* was shared 17 times, *City A.M.* 9 times and Conservative Home twice. Beyond these outlets, they also shared articles from regional papers across England, covering regions including Greater London, South East England, the East of England, the East and West Midlands, North West England and North East England. Unsurprisingly (given these papers typically covered local government), the concentration of these papers reflected the geographical spread of UKIP supporters and local representatives in the East, South East and Midlands, with more limited support in the North West and North East.

Finally, UKIP shared articles from radical libertarian and 'alt-right' sources. In total, the party shared 4 posts from Guido Fawkes, operated by right-wing blogger Paul Staines. Three of these posts referred to UKIP explicitly, including one blog post that the party referred to as an "interesting story" on party portrayals in mainstream media coverage; the fourth was an allegation that Nick Clegg was briefed by civil servants ahead of the debates with Farage on EU membership, published with a comment from Patrick O'Flynn. UKIP also shared 94 posts from the far-right syndicated news website Breitbart. These articles included positive coverage of party campaigns, criticism of established parties, Euroscepticism and, of course, anti-immigration and anti-refugee scaremongering, with headlines claiming that "Women Are The First Victims Of State-Sponsored Multiculturalism" (referring to the New Year's Eve



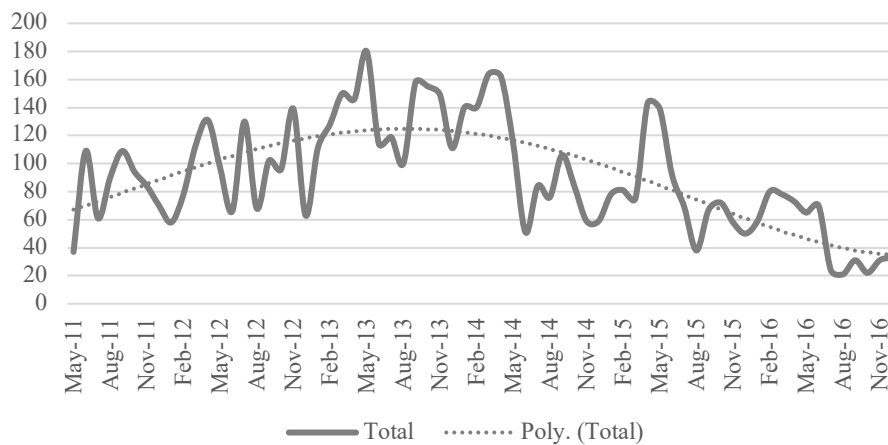
sexual assaults in Cologne, dubbed the “Pan-European Migrant Rape Story” in another headline), “Why Are There 214,000 National Insurance Numbers for Romanians and Bulgarians, But Only 53,000 Immigrants”, and “UK Immigration And Related Crime Still Soaring”. Finally, Breitbart, like *The Express*, also gave Nigel Farage opportunities for regular comment articles, called ‘Farage for Breitbart’, concerning EU migration, the refugee crisis and the ‘Calais Chaos’ (referring to the migrant village near the Port of Calais), Conservative Party Euroscepticism, and EU ‘power grabs’. These sections were all shared on Facebook, which, as with *The Express*, would have had reciprocal benefits for both UKIP’s media exposure and Breitbart’s revenue streams.

#### **- Social or traditional media?**

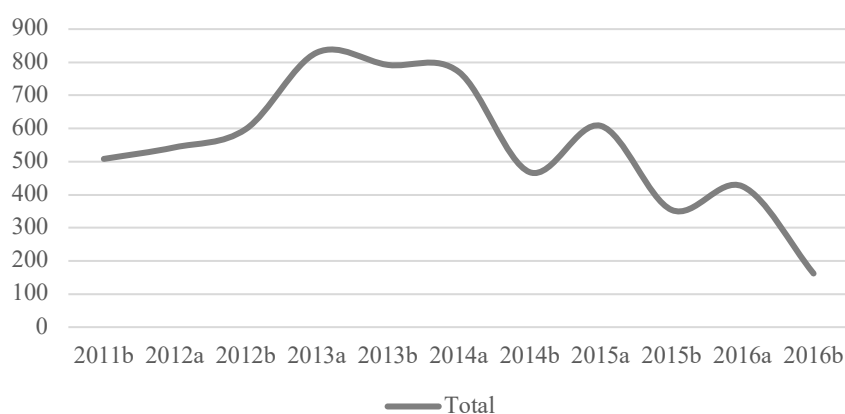
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of UKIP’s Facebook use was how it peaked between January 2013 and June 2014 (fig. 6.3), rather than increasing consistently throughout the span of the corpus as with Britain First. Prior to 2013, output rose consistently. From May 2011 to December 2012, the total output of Facebook content was 1,795 posts; the monthly averages of output for 2011 and 2012 were approximately 82 posts and 95 posts respectively. From January 2013 to June 2014, however, UKIP published 2,392 individual posts, comprising over a third (approximately 38.6 percent) of all posts published in the entire corpus (6,204 total) in approximately a quarter of the total time studied. The yearly and biannual totals over these eighteen months demonstrates that output over this time was relatively even. For January to June 2013, July to December 2013 and January to June 2014, the totals for these periods were 829 posts, 792 posts and 771 posts respectively (fig. 6.4); the monthly averages for these same periods were approximately 138, 132 and 128 posts per month respectively (fig. 6.3). This peak coincided with the preamble to the 2013 local elections and 2014 European elections, both of

which were significant electoral breakthroughs. In 2013, the party won 147 seats, 139 of which were gains, in a victory Nigel Farage described as “a game changer” and “a real sea-change in British politics” (BBC, 2013; Hope, 2013). UKIP continued this momentum through to the European elections, when UKIP became the first political party since 1910 other than the Conservatives or Labour to win a national election (Kirkup and Swinford, 2014; Wintour and Watt, 2014).

**(Fig. 6.3): monthly output totals for UKIP's Facebook**



**(Fig. 6.4): six-month cumulative output totals for UKIP's Facebook**

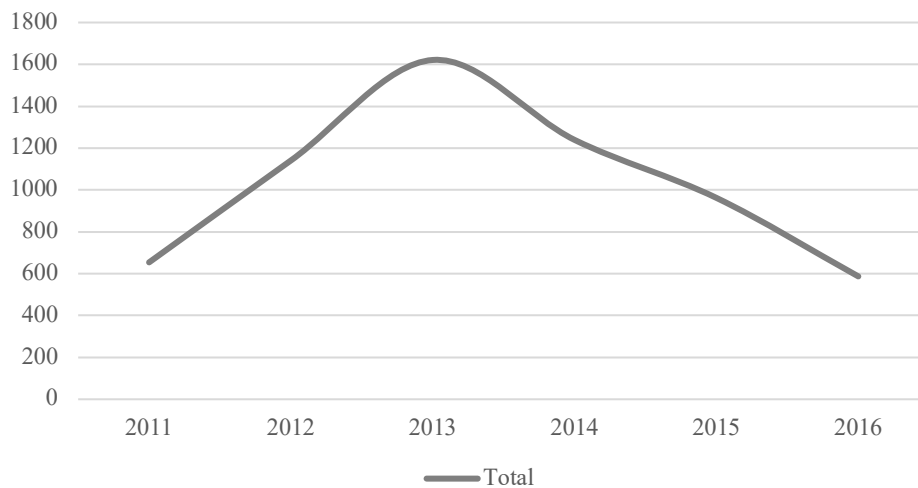


From mid-2014, however, the number of posts began to fall consistently. From July to December 2014, UKIP published 468 posts in total, or 78 posts per month. In 2015, the total

number of posts totalled 962 (fig. 6.5). The monthly average for the year totalled approximately 80 posts per month, though this was skewed upwards by a spike from April to June, where the monthly average was 124 posts compared to 65 posts per month for the remaining 9 months. By 2016, the total and monthly average had fallen further to 587 posts total, or approximately 49 posts per month. In both 2015 and 2016, the majority of posts came during the first six months of each year (fig. 6.4) prior to the 2015 general election and 2016 EU referendum. In fact, in 2015, the number of posts in January to June amounted to over 63 percent for the year (608 posts out of 962); in 2016, the number of posts between January and June amounted to 77 percent for the year (425 out of 587). For the last six months of 2016, the monthly average all but collapsed to 27 posts per month.

These peaks, both in terms of the overall quantity of posts but also during 2015 and 2016, perhaps demonstrate how UKIP's social media strategy changed as the party's popularity and exposure increased. Given that running social media channels, and the creation of content for these channels, requires resources that could be deployed elsewhere (and indeed, for smaller parties, the opportunity costs of investing in social media is greater than for large parties given relative access to work hours and finances), it is reasonable to use the quantity of social media output as a proxy variable to quantify the importance UKIP placed on the channel over time. Based on this metric, we can see that, as UKIP emerged from a minor, single-issue party to one capable of contesting (and winning) national and non-European elections, their investment in social media increased; however, once the party reached national significance, achieving significant levels of exposure and polling, their investment in social media declined, likely in favour of other forms of media, with the exception of during important campaigns such as elections.

(Fig. 6.5): yearly output totals for UKIP's Facebook

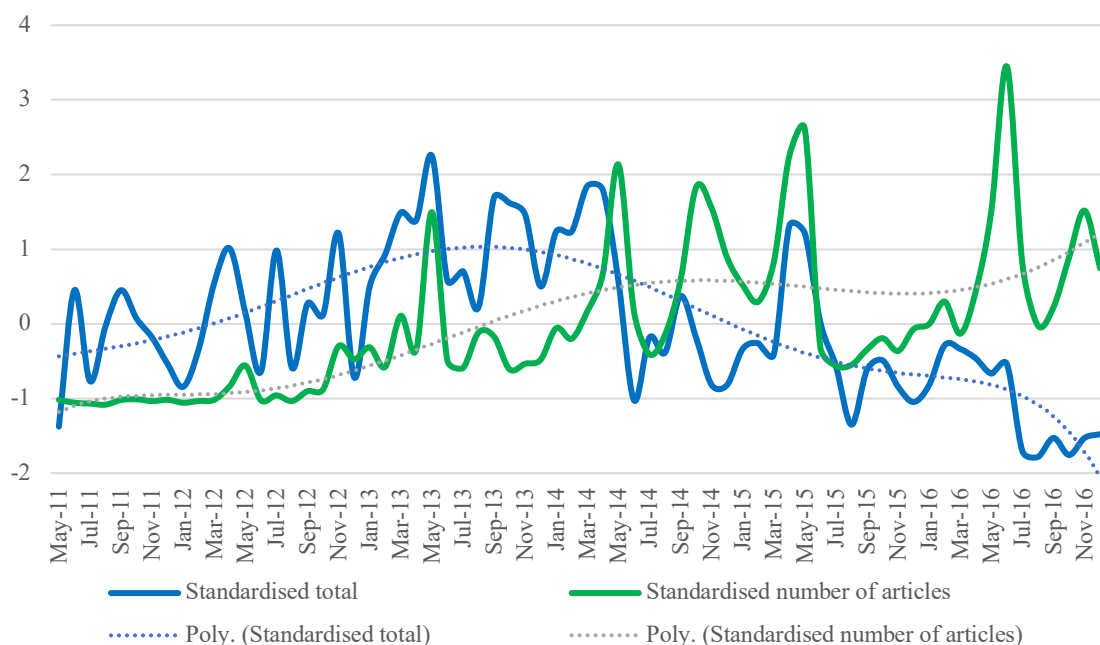


This can be demonstrated by mapping the output quantity proxy variable against quantitative polling data, supported by qualitative analysis of the amount of press coverage the group received over the same period. Justin Murphy and Daniel Devine, for instance, have mapped monthly aggregate polling data for voting intentions as a variable for party support against the number of articles mentioning UKIP to examine whether media coverage underpins public support or vice versa. By giving each variable a standardised score (subtracting the series mean from each value and dividing by one standard deviation) to simplify comparison, Murphy and Devine found there to be statistically significant evidence for small correlations for the former hypothesis (2018: 8-9). Given this precedent, briefly comparing social media output to news coverage, which itself would be influenced by less variables than voting preferences, similarly helps understand UKIP's Facebook strategy.

Examining the data used by Murphy and Devine, both from Ipsos MORI and other polling agencies and the Nexis database for news articles, it is clear that coverage by traditional media (in national newspapers at least, but likely in other formats too), began to trend upwards consistently from 2012 (fig. 6.6). During April and May, the party enjoyed a slight increase in article mentions due to a moderately successful local election campaign (Davies, 2012). However, the number of articles began to increase from October 2012, in the run-up to several

by-elections in Corby, Rotherham, Croydon North and Middlesbrough, where UKIP appeared to be polling strongly. The party would achieve second place in Rotherham and Middlesbrough and third place in Croydon North and Corby (Watt, 2012; Pidd and Wainwright, 2012). The increasing media coverage was recognised at the time by Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, who noted in November 2013 that, “[i]n 2012, UKIP mentions reached a record high of over 10,000, but so far in 2013 this figure has already more than doubled again, and with two months of the year still left to run” (2013).

(Fig 6.6): Facebook output and the number of print media articles

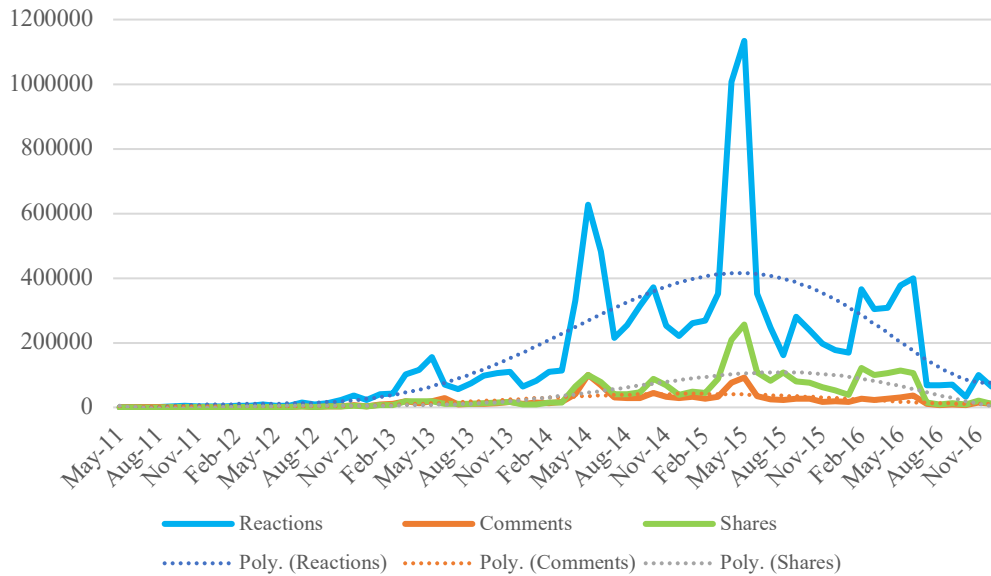


UKIP’s surge in media coverage even extended to coverage of its social media channels, despite the fall in Facebook output after the European elections. In October 2014, even as their output had already begun to fall, *The Guardian* ran an article with the headline “[i]s Ukip winning on Facebook and Twitter?” based on the number of followers the party had accrued on each platform, which, at the time, numbered over 276,000 on Facebook and 69,000 on Twitter (Perraudin, 2014). Similarly, in 2015, *The Telegraph* declared that UKIP’s Facebook followers were more engaged than followers of other parties, averaging 7,000 likes

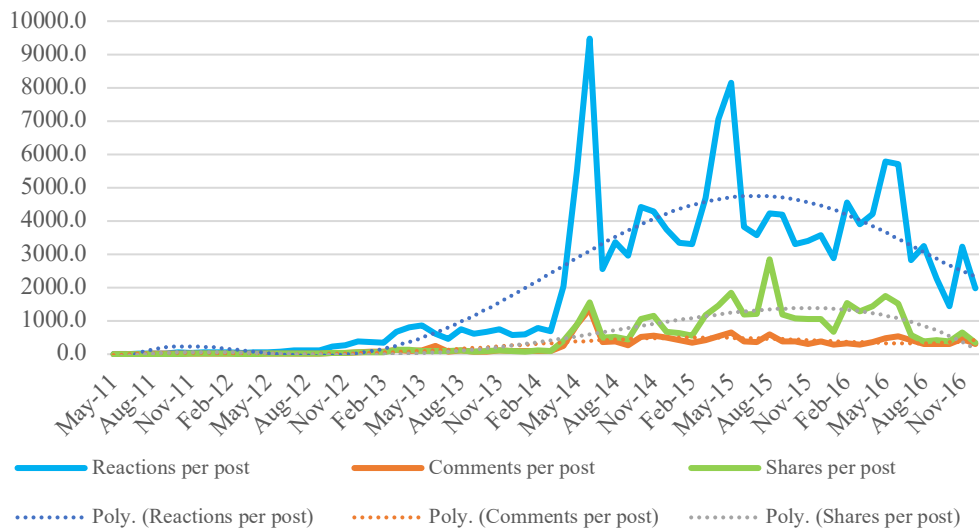
per post. Whilst both metrics demonstrate significant support for the party online, neither examine how UKIP itself considered social media within its broader communications and engagement strategy after the European elections. Meanwhile, even as the party's media coverage continued to increase or otherwise remained consistent into December 2016, UKIP's total Facebook output began to decrease from mid-2014 (fig. 6.4). Given that total output, unlike engagements or followers, would be an endogenous variable for the party, the continuous decline in posts implies that Facebook became less and less of a priority.

That said, whilst some correlation between the amount of media coverage and the importance of social media is apparent, correlation should not uncritically imply causation. However, qualitative analysis of UKIP's media strategy does suggest primacy of traditional media within the party's overall campaign strategy. Five months after UKIP's local election success, Ford and Goodwin describe Farage's media strategy as "aggressive" and "relentless", but noted that it was simultaneously "producing results" by "attracting historically unprecedented levels of interest" by positioning UKIP firmly within the UK's public debates on immigration alongside the party's traditional Eurosceptic platform (Goodwin and Ford, 2013). Farage himself described his role as managing "'the three M's: media, messaging and money'" and stated that this renewed media strategy "'was very conscious'" to communicate the party's domestic agenda beyond the single issue of leaving the EU (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 90). Indeed, aggressive media campaigning to broaden the party's appeal made sense within the context of UKIP's contemporary successes, objectives and failures. Ford and Goodwin note that maintaining the public and media surge following European electoral successes that had previously been squandered was key to achieving domestic electoral breakthrough (2014: 233).

(Fig. 6.7): overall Facebook engagements per month



(Fig. 6.8): average Facebook engagements per month



Similarly, quantitative analysis of UKIP's Facebook analytics demonstrate that the party began neglecting social media just as their page entered its most successful period. Between May 2011 and the end of 2012, engagements and average engagements in all categories were increasing relatively consistently following the four by-elections (fig. 6.7 and fig. 6.8). Between 2013 and mid-2014, when the party's social media output was at its highest,

engagements (particularly reactions) began to increase at a faster rate. Furthermore, there was a significant spike in June 2014 in all engagement metrics following the European election result the previous month, with average reactions also reaching their highest level for any month in the corpus (fig. 6.8). However, as output fell from the second half of 2014, average engagements remained fairly constant for the remainder of the corpus, with two exceptions in May and June 2015 and May and June 2016 following the 2015 general election and 2016 EU referendum respectively. In these months, output also increased, resulting in a greater than proportionate increase in total engagements for each of these months (fig. 6.7). Significantly, these spikes demonstrate that it was not an instance of UKIP's overall reduced output increasing engagements in and of itself, but rather due to an engaged following that responded to party content at the time. Moreover, due to feedback provided by analytics tools such as Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics and the equivalents for other platforms, it is likely that the managers of UKIP's social media platforms were aware of these rates at the time.

That said, there are limitations to social media analytics. Whilst this is most obvious in the political sphere – large followings and levels of engagements does not necessarily correlate to mobilisation or electoral success – this is also a key consideration in industries that have become increasingly reliant on social media. For brands, and PR and marketing firms associated with them, social media has similarly “failed to live up to its promise as a panacea of customer-centricity” due to ‘noisy minorities’ of social media enthusiasts driving a majority of social media engagements, which does then not correlate to product sales or customer loyalty (Kapko, 2015; Traphagen, 2015). However, these same metrics can provide insight into a brand's content or campaign effectiveness and efficiency, search engine optimisation value and indirect sales (Traphagen, 2015; Force, 2016). Irrespective of considerations about the political value of their high rate of engagements, in terms of electoral success or otherwise, these



analytics reinforce consideration that UKIP prioritised traditional media during its media campaign.

## UKIP Video

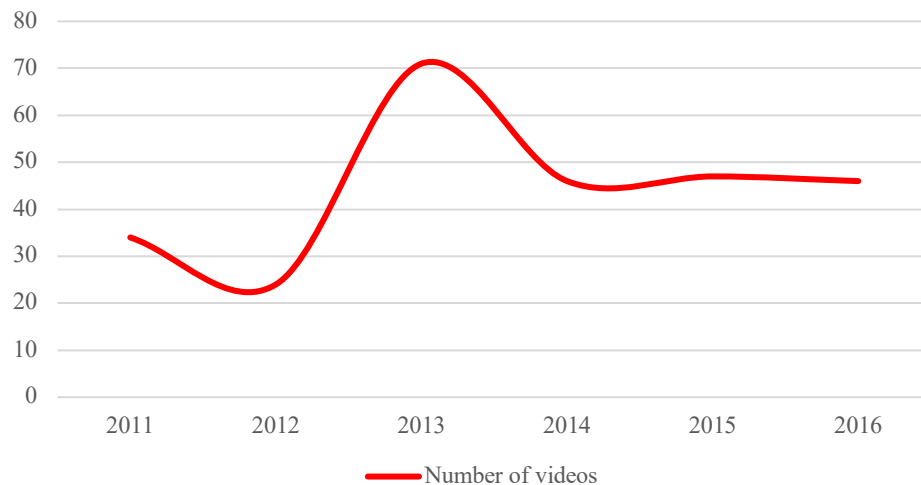
UKIP operated three main YouTube channels as part of its YouTube strategy: Its official channel focused on its domestic campaigns; its MEPs channel covered party work in the European Parliament; and Europarl, an affiliated ‘sister channel’, focused specifically on the work of Nigel Farage. From the inception of these channels through to 2016, all three began by posting a range of content before becoming more focused in scope. For the official channel and Europarl, narrowing the range of content also signalled each channel falling out of use; by 2016, only the MEPs account was being used consistently.

The UKIP Official Channel was set up in July 2011. According to the description, the channel was “Published and Promoted by Steve Crowther [party chair from November 2010 to June 2016 and acting leader til September 2017] on behalf of UKIP”. The first videos were simple ‘talking head’ videos of prospective party candidates for the London Mayoral election, with each describing their respective campaign platforms should they be selected. Presumably these videos were embedded on another website where members could select who to give their candidacy to. However, almost immediately, the party moved away from using YouTube as a video hosting site and begin to experiment with the channel as a social media platform.

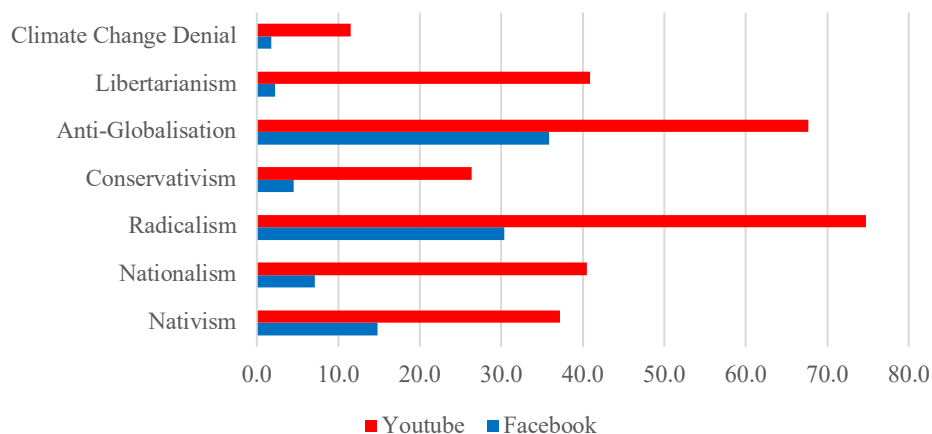
In total, UKIP uploaded 269 videos between July 2011 and December 2016. In terms of yearly trends, for the first three years, UKIP used their channel inconsistently, but content was varied; for the subsequent three years, their rate of use was consistent, but their content was much more formulaic and less intriguing (fig. 6.9). In 2011, the party uploaded 34 videos

to their official YouTube channel; in 2012, they uploaded 25 videos; in 2013, they uploaded a corpus high of 71 videos; from 2014 to 2016, they uploaded 46, 47 and 46 videos respectively. The 2013 peak coincided with the peak in Facebook content, underlining the emphasis placed on social media in that year.

(Fig. 6.9): videos uploaded per year to the UKIP Official Channel



(Fig 6.10): percentage of content by ideological message for UKIP's Official YouTube Channel and Facebook



Given the relative long-form nature of video compared to Facebook posts, the number of videos positing policy agendas was far higher for UKIP's official YouTube channel than its Facebook page. As such, more ideological positions were advocated on more videos than were

similarly advocated in Facebook posts as a proportion of the overall output (fig. 6.10). Moreover, in the videos surveyed, *nationalist*- and *libertarian*-coded posts occurred far more frequently than *nativist*-coded posts. This may have been because a greater proportion of YouTube content pertained to electoral campaigns; during the years when elections dominated Facebook content as well (i.e., 2015 and 2016), nationalistic content was relatively higher than in other years (roughly 5.1 percent between 2011 and 2014 compared to 13 percent for 2015 and 2016). Similarly, socially conservative policy positions (such as advocating traditional social and family values) libertarian arguments and climate change denial occurred considerably more than on Facebook due to the number of conference speeches dedicated to them. The Official Channel focused mainly on domestic issues, unlike the party's other channels. In terms of *nativist*-coded content, 95 videos (over a third of all uploads) exhibited culture-based prejudiced themes, focusing on immigration, asylum and the refugee crisis. Furthermore, 30 videos, more than 11 percent, articulated the party's NHS policy, 20 videos referenced toughening up policing and criminal justice, 17 videos argued for the need to increase the provision of housing and 12 videos expressed opposition to HS2.

In the first few years, UKIP committed to creating content specifically for YouTube. One example of this was an episodic video series, titled 'UKIP @ Large with Nigel Farage'. Each episode featured an interview segment with various UKIP candidates and activists. Each episode also featured a 'Mug of the Month' (including former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the charity LionAid and then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy), featuring "inaneities [and] stupidities" as nominated by followers, with the nominated submitter winning a free lunch with Farage. Other one-off videos or miniseries included interviews with party members, behind-the-scenes 'mini-docs', such as UKIP candidates on campaign trails, at protests and engaging with the public, and 'explainer'-style videos on specific policy positions. During the Corby and Eastleigh by-elections, for instance, the channel featured interviews with Margot Parker and

Diane James on topics such as local jobs and immigration. Similarly, the party published several videos to draw attention to EU and political rivals' policy failings, such as on immigration, fisheries, agriculture, and HS2. The channel also repurposed videos from other media, including media appearances, such as from clips from BBC *Question Time*, *The Daily* and *Sunday Politics* and *The Andrew Marr Show*, election broadcasts and speeches by UKIP MEPs in the European Parliament that performed well on other channels.

From 2013, however, UKIP's video strategy changed drastically. Rather than creating content designed specifically for YouTube, the party instead began to use their channel again as a hosting platform for conference speeches. In 2013, 14 videos were uploads from the UKIP Spring Conference in Exeter (four of which were of speeches made by Farage). A further 34 videos were uploads of speeches, presentations and Q&A sessions from the UKIP Party Conference in September, held in London. As well as speeches party leaders, these videos also featured lectures from guest speakers such as Mark Littlewood, Director General for the Institute of Economic Affairs, Slavi Binev, MEP for the EFD Group, Timo Soini, leader of the True Finns party, Lord Digby Jones, and others. Finally, 13 videos were taken from speeches at the UKIP South East Conference in June. In total, 61 of the 71 videos posted in 2013, or approximately 86 percent, were from conferences. This was significantly higher than previous years: only 7 of the 34 videos (20.5 percent) posted in 2011 and just 3 of the 25 (12 percent) posted in 2012 featured such.

This trend continued from 2014. Thirty of the 46 uploads in 2014, for example, were from the UKIP conference in March despite the media controversy that followed a series of racist jokes made at the conference's gala dinner (Swinford and Carter, 2014). In 2015, 22 videos were taken from the UKIP Spring Conference in Margate and another from the Party Conference in Doncaster, totalling 23 out of 47 videos (or roughly 47 percent). Finally, in 2016, 33 out of 46 videos (or 71.7 percent) were taken from conferences, including 15 videos were

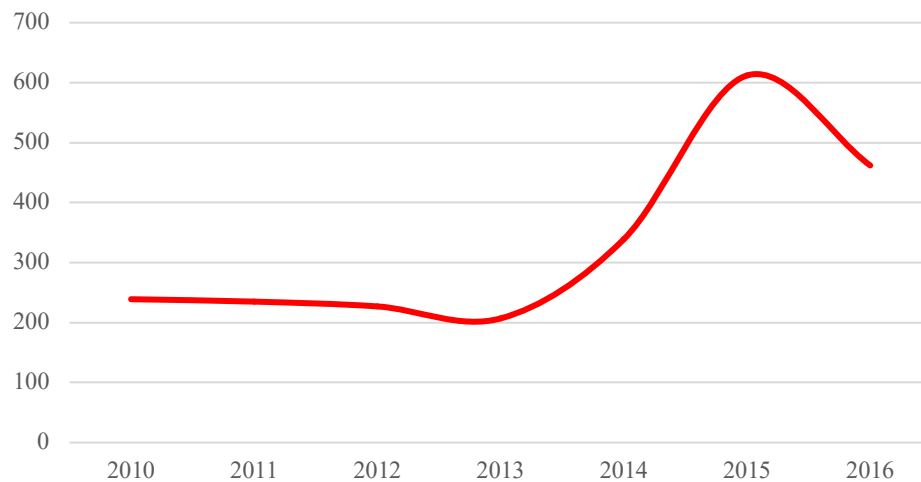
taken from the Spring Conference in Llandudno and 18 from the UKIP Party Conference in Bournemouth. Despite the number of videos posted in 2014 to 2016 being higher than in 2011 and 2012, the concentration of posts around months when conferences occurred meant that the party's use of the channel by 2016 was much more inconsistent than when the overall output was lower.

The 'UKIP MEPs' YouTube channel, on the other hand, served as the official channel for UKIP Members of the European Parliament, affiliated with the Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy Group. As stated on its description tab, the channel was started in November 2009 and almost entirely featured videos from "Plenary and Committee speeches by UKIP MEPs". However, it also featured several videos from interviews with media outlets on EU business, most prominently with RT (formerly Russia Today). Moreover, a small number of its earlier videos also included speeches made by MEPs at party conferences and behind the scenes videos with MEPs themselves, often discussing how the EU might affect UK policy. Examples of the former included three videos of Farage at the 2010 UKIP Party Spring Conference in Milton Keynes; examples of the latter included a video of Farage discussing how EU rules prevented a British ban on the drug mephedrone and another of Farage hosted by the Institute for Economic Affairs.

In total, 2,351 videos were posted to the UKIP MEPs channel, at a rate of roughly 328 a year, or 27 per month. Almost all of these videos were subsequently embedded in the UKIP MEPs website, [ukipmeps.org](http://ukipmeps.org), to accompany press releases and blog posts written by or about MEPs on party work. Videos were typically posted one day or so after each speech took place, and footage was sourced from the Parliament's own stream. Given that videos were posted whenever there were speeches or media appearances to post about, there were no discernible trends to discuss when examining the yearly breakdown. Indeed, the number of videos (and therefore speeches) was relatively consistent until 2014 and 2015, in the year of and the year

after the European elections that saw UKIP become the biggest party in European Parliament with 24 MEPs (fig. 6.11).

**(Fig. 6.11): videos uploaded per year to the UKIP MEPs channel**



UKIP MEPs often overlapped with the Europarl channel. Europarl was formed several years prior to the MEPs channel, in January 2007. In each account's 'about' tab, both channels described the other as a 'sister channel' and both were the only channels listed as the other's featured channels. In total, the channel featured 220 videos between 2007 and 2012, at a rate of less than two videos per month. Primarily, the channel featured speeches by Farage (and, prior to his expulsion, Godfrey Bloom). Unlike the UKIP MEPs channel, Europarl initially featured a broader range of content beyond speeches in the Parliament, including interviews, television appearances and explainer videos, until 2012. By the end of 2016, the account was in the process of being phased out, making the account a rather minor part of UKIP's YouTube presence.

## Yearly Facebook trends

Overall, the corpus covered UKIP's rise from the margins of British politics, contesting local and by-elections as a "dissident party" – as described by Elizabeth Jones at the South East Party Conference (UKIP Official Channel, 2013a) – to a party capable of winning at the national level. Naturally, the party's overall strategy, audience and messages changed to reflect this increasing prominence. A year-by-year overview was considered more appropriate than a semi-annual overview. First, given that UKIP began using Facebook in 2011, the corpus covered a longer timespan than BF. Second, UKIP posted less content; UKIP's yearly output was roughly comparable to Britain First's monthly production. Taking both factors together, examining data from UKIP's page in terms of yearly trends was both more efficient whilst also relatively detailed.

#### **- May to December 2011**

UKIP's official Facebook page was launched in May 2011 in the run-up to several local elections. The page replaced a rarely-used previous incarnation and was launched with the somewhat uninspiring declaration "[n]ew page being built up". Several posts within this first month point to the page initially being intended as a hub for activists to communicate amongst themselves, with content often being casual and amateurish in nature. In particular, posts tended to be written in the first person, using a conversational tone, and implied familiarity between the account manager and followers. One post from May 6<sup>th</sup>, for instance, stated that the account manager was: "[o]ff to my count as I bet most of you who are standing will be". Another, from May 9<sup>th</sup>, asked followers simply "What made you join / support [*sic*] UKIP?", which was one of most commented posts published in the first few months. Otherwise, posts sometimes contained spelling errors or slang. One post directed at party activists stated: "Any

photos of the campaign trail send them to [the account manager's email address] and i'll make an album for the 2011 elections [*sic*]". Another, posted on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, asked: "[c]ould it be... David Campbell Bannerman slagging off his new party as early as May!"

Despite this, the party's following grew steadily. By July 13<sup>th</sup>, it exceeded 1,000 followers. Growing the size of the community was evidently a key objective in these early months. One text-based post on September 6<sup>th</sup>, for example, urged supporters to "[d]o 1 thing to help UKIP today. Scroll down to the bottom left of this page and click SHARE. With your help we can grow." Another, posted on September 17<sup>th</sup>, asked: "[e]veryone please share the Page and help us get to 2,000 supporters!" Primarily, the party targeted Conservative voters: on July 16<sup>th</sup>, for example, the party stated that "Tory 'euroscepticism' has failed. Time for change. Time for action. Time to leave the European Union. LIKE if you agree". These calls to action were relatively successful, and by December 10<sup>th</sup>, the party reached 4,000 followers.

In terms of ideology, the party focused predominantly on *anti-globalisation*-coded (particularly Eurosceptic) and *anti-establishment*-coded content. As well as targeting traditional Conservative Eurosceptics, the party also used the page to campaign against EU membership in June with reference to the ongoing European sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone (naming the European Union the "EUSSR" in equivocation to the Soviet bloc) and to promote a petition calling for an EU referendum started by *The Express* in July. Regarding *anti-establishment* content, the party was also particularly critical of the BBC after Farage was uninvited from *The Breakfast Show*, with Young Independence Chairman Harry Aldridge stating in one post that it was "[t]ime to scrap the license fee and break the BBC monopoly. Far more powerful than Murdoch's NewsCorp and far less accountable."

As well as these national, ideological issues, UKIP's content also focused on populist local community issues. A significant proportion of populist and clickbait-style content was posted in August. In total, 8 posts concerned the London riots, which occurred between the 6<sup>th</sup>



and 11<sup>th</sup> following the shooting of Mark Duggan by police on the 4<sup>th</sup>. UKIP criticised the government response, citing multiculturalism as the cause, and called for the army to be deployed to regain control of the streets. The party also posted 3 times about the financial crisis, on which they blamed the Labour government as much as ‘the bankers’. The most common local issues concerned campaigns against pub closures, the smoking ban in public places and High Speed 2. In total, UKIP posted 14 times to raise awareness of local pub closures and support pubs in several areas, 5 times to promote petitions against HS2 and 3 times each against the smoking ban and in support of increasing the provision of housing in local communities.

#### **- 2012: by-elections**

2012 marked a change of fortunes, both online and offline. UKIP’s Facebook following surged throughout the year, even as the party gained ground on established political parties in the polls. Having finished 2011 on 4,000 followers, the party reached 5,000 by mid-February. Even so, UKIP’s community on Facebook continued to grow, and at an increasing pace. In April, the party publicised that it was polling at 9 percent nationally, and at 17 percent amongst the over-60s, overtaking the Liberal Democrats, which had been previously described as an “important yardstick” whilst campaigning in March during the Bradford West by-election. By April 20<sup>th</sup>, the party reached 6,000 followers, and then reached 7,000 less than three weeks later. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, the party achieved 222,000 votes in England, more than double the 98,000 votes it received in 2008. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, the party claimed that membership had trebled in the last two years and reached 8,000 followers by July 7<sup>th</sup>.

By October, their community had reached another major milestone, exceeding 10,000 followers on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, party membership surged again in late November, with the party gaining 750 members over one weekend following the news that Rotherham Borough

Council had removed three children from a UKIP-supporting foster family due to concerns over the party's stance on immigration (BBC, 2012c). Finally, in December, the party published several posts following polls by ComRes, Survation and Opinium that put support at roughly 14 to 16 percent nationally, which was their highest ever polling. Publicising social media, polling and electoral milestones contributed to the overall increase in content that promoted group news and communications, which more than doubled in total terms (from 249 in 2011 to 592 in 2012) and significantly increased proportionately (from 38.1 percent in 2011 to 51.8 percent in 2012).

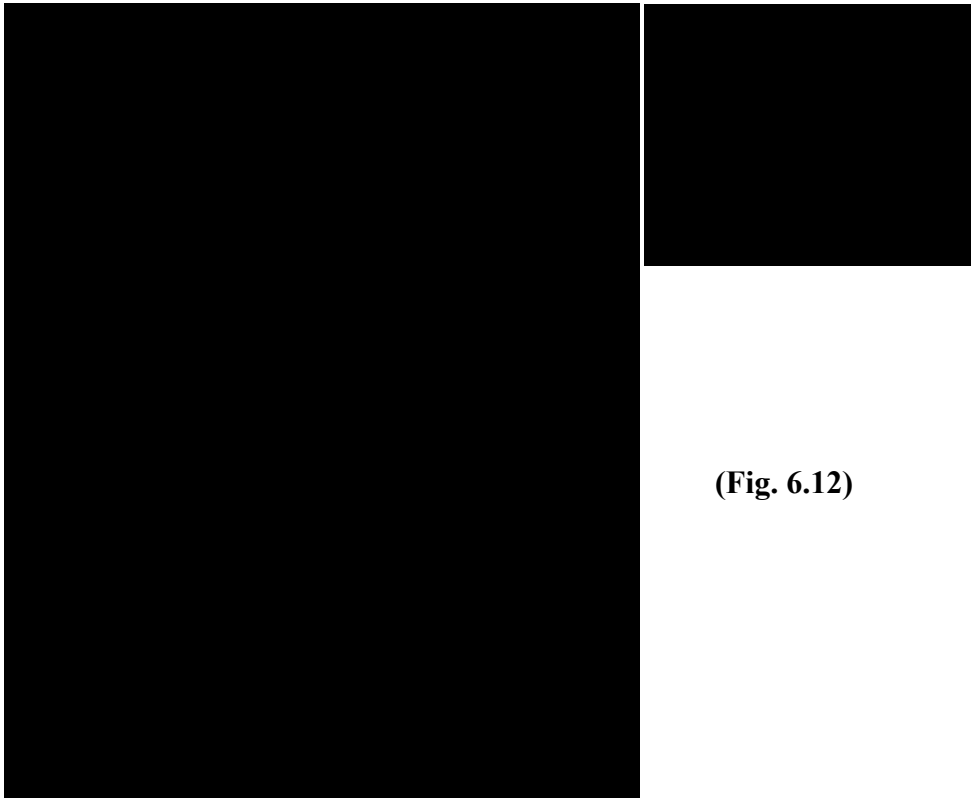
Throughout 2012, UKIP increasingly began to post content critical of mainstream political parties and the political establishment itself. Overall, the proportion of *anti-establishment*-coded posts increased from 21.3 percent to 28.5 percent. Similarly, the number of posts increased nominally from 139 posts from May to December 2011 to 325 for the twelve months of 2012, which equated to an increase from just over 17 posts per month to just over 27 posts per month. Content focused on (but was not limited to) the Conservative Party, and in particular the perceived failure of Conservative Euroscepticism. Throughout the year, the party used its page to publicise defections from other parties whenever they occurred, such as councillors in Nantwich, Bradley Stoke and Milton Keynes, as well as Lord Stevens of Ludgate (September 17<sup>th</sup>)<sup>15</sup> and the Mayor of Royston (December 10<sup>th</sup>). In July, UKIP published several posts critical of David Cameron following reports that Cameron would reject a referendum on Britain's EU membership. Thirty-five of the 130 posts in July concerned Cameron's "smoke and mirrors" of a "vague promise of a future EU Referendum" or otherwise publicised broadcast appearances on the topic. A further 9 posts formed a campaign to promote Farage's challenge to Cameron for a televised debate, including photos of Farage delivering a letter to

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<sup>15</sup> Technically, Lord Stevens was an 'independent Conservative' prior to joining UKIP, having been expelled from the Conservative Party in 2004 for signing a letter supporting UKIP (BBC, 2012b).

Downing Street in person (fig. 6.12). By September, however, the party's rhetoric had shifted following an article from Martin Kettle in *The Guardian* that UKIP would "shape the 2015 election and the politics of Britain and Europe for a generation" (Kettle, 2015). Subsequently, UKIP publicised a statement from Farage that the party "would only be prepared to make a pact with the Conservatives at the next general election if David Cameron's party made a promise 'written in blood' to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU".

Furthermore, with the London mayoral elections, local elections, PCC elections and by-elections, and media attention that came with their relative success in the latter, UKIP also increased output that communicated party news and aimed to mobilise followers. Mobilisation posts increased proportionately from 13 percent in 2011 to 17.4 percent in 2012 and nominally from 85 posts overall, over 10.5 posts per month, to 199 posts, over 16.5 posts per month. Communications posts, meanwhile, increased significantly, from 38.1 percent to 51.9 percent, which equated to 249 posts, approximately 31 per month, to 592 posts, approximately 49 per month. Though mainly these posts concerned 'light-touch' news, the party also used their Facebook page to release information about more serious incidents. One such incident was the suspension of Geoffrey Clark, a local candidate standing in the Kent County Council election, who was formally suspended from the party after it emerged that his personal website endorsed the view that the "NHS ... look at compulsory abortion of foetuses with Down's syndrome or spina bifida", a policy he claimed "he did not endorse ... but suggested ... to cut the national debt" (BBC, 2012d). The party itself condemned Clark's manifesto through two notices published as text-only posts. The first post stated that "[w]e in no way endorse the views of Geoffrey Clarke [*sic*]. He will not stand for us again and we are reviewing his position." The second post, released an hour later, stated that the party was unaware of his views, that he had been formally suspended and that he would not be allowed to stand as a party candidate again.

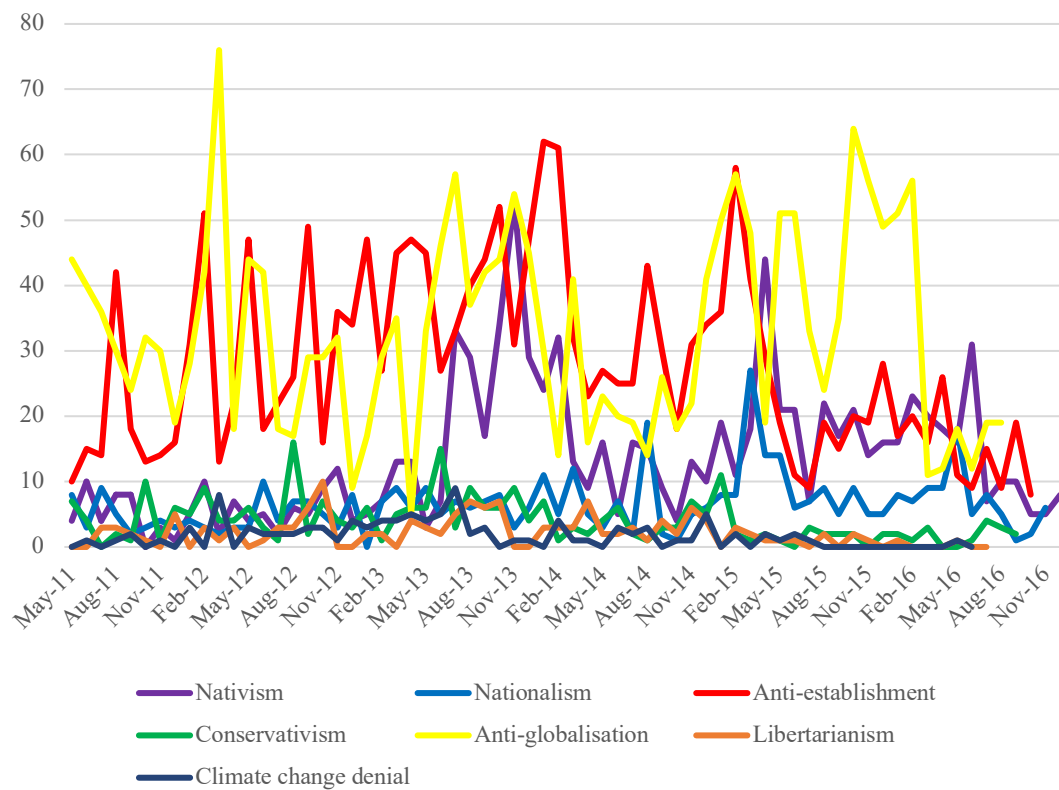


(Fig. 6.12)

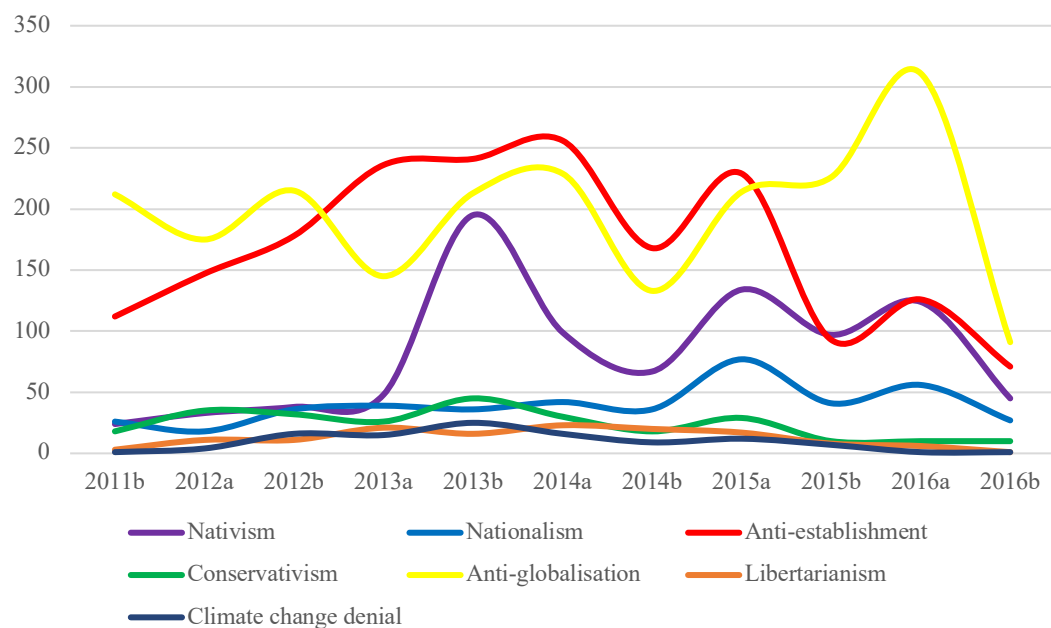
#### - 2013: local elections

In February, UKIP reached 9 percent in a Guardian/ICM poll, which was a new (ICM) high. The party polled at 21 percent in the lead-up to the Eastleigh by-election, eventually coming 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1,012 votes ahead of the Conservatives. In April, the party surpassed 25,300 members, an increase of over 7,000 from December. Meanwhile, ComRes polls suggested that support for UKIP was reaching even greater heights, which was then promoted through UKIP's Facebook. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, ComRes put UKIP at 22 percent nationally; on May 20<sup>th</sup>, polling had the party on 22 percent again, after a brief drop on the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19 percent. By May 28<sup>th</sup>, polling suggested that the party would gain 17 percent of the vote nationally and 27 percent in the 2014 European elections. From May, party membership began growing at roughly 1,000 per month, reaching 30,000 by July. Though the membership surge slowed thereafter, the party managed to reach 31,000 members by late September and 32,000 members by mid-November.

(Fig. 6.13): monthly totals of ideological messages



(Fig. 6.14): six-month cumulative totals of ideological messages



Against this backdrop, UKIP's online community also surged. In March, Michael Heaven, who would become Farage's press aide from mid-2015 to December 2016 before leaving to launch Westmonster with UKIP donor and Leave.EU co-founder Arron Banks, was promoted to Head of Online Engagement. By May 2<sup>nd</sup>, on the day of local elections polling, the party reached 30,000 online supporters. Just over five months later, its following had exploded to 50,000. In December, an article in the *Independent* reported that, according to data from Twitter, UKIP was the most mentioned political topic of the year amongst British people (Morse, 2013). Speaking through the UKIP Facebook page on November 11<sup>th</sup>, Farage asserted that, "[t]o be honest, if it wasn't for the internet we wouldn't be here. YouTube and Facebook and all of this has helped us to reach an audience we would not have reached."

In terms of political messages in 2013, for the most part UKIP continued along the same lines as 2012 (fig. 6.14 and 6.15). That being said, there was a notable increase in *nativist*-coded content. In 2012, 71 out of 1,141 posts posited *nativist* themes, equalling approximately 6.2 percent of the year's content (similar to the proportion in 2011). In 2013, this proportion increased to 15 percent, or 243 posts out of 1,621. The majority of this content came in the second half of 2013, with *nativist*-coded content from July to December comprising 24.6 percent of content posted over those six months, which equated to 195 posts overall or 80.2 percent of nativist content for the year. In August, for instance, the party expressed their support for a dinner lady who was sacked for accidentally serving pork to a Muslim pupil. Nigel Farage stated "[i]t's outrageous... we're so terrified in this country of causing offence to anybody, particularly the Muslim religion."

UKIP also posted several times a video detailing their 'common sense approach to immigration', which dovetailed Farage's 'Common Sense Tour' in April. From September to December, the party shared several news stories, e-petitions and website links incorporating anti-immigrant tropes by emphasising heath tourism, Romanian and Bulgarian migration (43

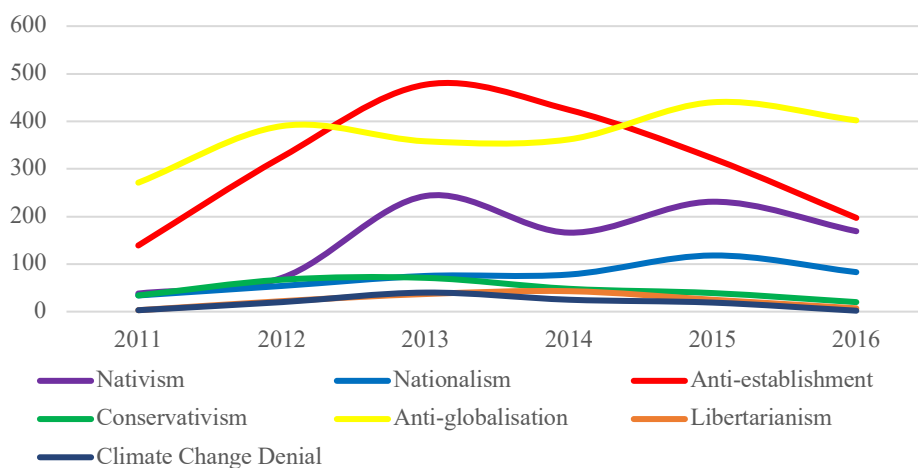
posts), Romanian criminal gangs (8 posts) and social tensions caused by ‘influxes’ of Roma people (5 posts). That said, the party did oppose proposed on-the-spot immigration checks, describing it as abhorrent on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, citing the threat to citizens of Afro-Caribbean heritage and arguing that tougher border controls would achieve the same result. In several posts, similarly, the party condemned the decision for white British parents who prevented their children visiting a local Mosque on a school visit in June and expressed their disgust at the defacement of Muslim gravestones with racist graffiti in July.

The party also continued to position itself as representing community interests. In total, 31 posts emphasised their opposition to HS2, 9 posts asserted their tough stance on crime, policing and criminal justice, and several others reiterated their stance on pub closures and the smoking ban. From August, the party focused even more locally, opposing parking charges at Queen’s Hospital in Burton, a 20 miles per hour speed limit in Birmingham and library closures across Lincolnshire. A further 13 posts stated explicitly their support for the NHS and for healthcare professionals, despite key figures in the party having stated otherwise previously (Bienkov, 2017). Finally, 25 posts in August and September, almost 25 percent of all posts for those months, expressed the party’s opposition to foreign intervention in Syria. Several posts were written in press notice-style, featuring quotes from Farage, such as one that stated: “[w]e’ve lost hundreds of lives in Iraq and Afghanistan the MoD budget is being slashed, resulting in thousands of job losses. ... How is it sensible to embark on another military intervention when the MoD is already struggling with substantial budget cuts and redundancies?” Another post, accompanied by a link to an ITV poll, emphasised that UKIP’s position on Syria aligned with the British public’s, stating simply: “74% of Brits oppose military intervention in Syria. So does UKIP.”

#### **- 2014: European elections**

Throughout 2014, directed by Michael Heaven, UKIP's Facebook capitalised on the media and public interest prior to the European elections and continued to expand its community. One Farage speech, posted 5 times in January, titled 'EU Now Run by Big Business, Big Banks and Big Bureaucrats', was watched 315,000 times within the first four days of posting. Underpinned by the surge in support, Facebook users increasingly began to engage with party content. By April 1<sup>st</sup>, the party had reached 70,000 followers, an increase of 20,000 within five months. Within two weeks of reaching this milestone, the party had already exceeded 80,000 followers. Two weeks after that, the party reached 90,000 followers, and by the end of the month had exceeded 95,000. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, UKIP hit the 100,000 mark, which would have been impressive in and of itself had the party not doubled this total by June 4<sup>th</sup>. By September 16<sup>th</sup>, UKIP reached another milestone with 250,000 supporters. By December 12<sup>th</sup>, their online support exceeded 300,000 people, more than five times the number that had followed the party at the start of the year.

(Fig. 6.15): yearly cumulative totals of ideological messages





In this time, the proportion of *anti-establishment*-coded content increased again, as UKIP aimed to distinguish themselves from the established political parties and deflect criticism from the press. Patrick O’Flynn, for instance, on BBC’s *Daily Politics* programme in March, stated that “it was UKIP thumbscrews on David Cameron that changed his mind [on an in/out EU referendum], and we’re about to put the thumbscrews on Ed Miliband as well”, This was emblematic of the party’s approach to the year. In total, 424 posts exhibited *anti-establishment* themes, or 34.2 percent of posts in the year (fig. 6.15). In April, UKIP’s Facebook began to refer to itself as the ‘People’s Army’, contrasted to an elitist, exclusive establishment. One post appealing to potential members, for instance, featured a quote from Farage urging followers to “[c]ome and join the peoples army [*sic*], let’s topple the establishment who got us into this mess”, and another, posted a week later, promoted the nationwide ‘Join the People’s Army’ Tour. Following a critical article in *The Times* examining Farage’s expenses as an MEP, UKIP published 10 posts referring to the paper as “the mouthpiece of the political establishment”, “The Blunderer” and “as part of the ‘chumocracy’ run by David Cameron”.

The party continued to use Facebook to publicise defections from other political parties, and from August to November were given a boost by several politically significant, high-profile defections. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, the party announced Douglas Carswell would be defecting to UKIP from the Conservatives. In total, 45 posts subsequently publicised Carswell’s campaign and ‘days of action’ for his by-election, featured quotes criticising the ‘Westminster Bubble’ and Conservative position on the EU, and promoted his work as an MP. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, the party announced that Mark Reckless would also be defecting from the Conservatives at UKIP’s Party Conference. As with the defection and election of Carswell, the party subsequently published 22 posts about Reckless. In one ‘Farage on Friday’, the party leader’s op-ed in *The Express*, Farage declared the by-election result a win over the establishment:

“[i]t’s not just Mark Reckless and UKIP that won the Rochester and Strood by-election yesterday. Everyone who is sick of the political status quo won yesterday”. Finally, on October 10<sup>th</sup>, the party announced that Arron Banks would be joining UKIP as a donor and posted twice more that Banks would be increasing his initial donation of £100,000 to £1 million after he was dismissed as a ‘nobody’ by Conservative Leader of the House William Hague.

### **- 2015: the general election**

In 2015, with the general election looming, UKIP’s Facebook presence continued to grow at a fast rate. Moreover, the party was outcompeting established political parties in terms of the size of its following and the level of engagements. By February 15<sup>th</sup>, the party had in excess of 336,000 followers, an increase of 275,000 from February 2014. In a post announcing their success, the party also claimed that, from Facebook’s own analytics, UKIP had achieved 125,000 engagements, which was more than Labour (67,000) and the Conservatives (33,000) had managed combined in the same period. In April, analysis from the Press Association suggested that UKIP’s followers were far more engaged than followers of other parties, getting more than 10,000 engagements per post, which was purportedly double the success rate of the Conservatives and five times that of Labour (ITV, 2015).

On the eve of the general election itself, UKIP was punching well above its weight. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, two days before the election, UKIP reached 450,000 followers. Facebook Insights for the party’s page indicated that, from January 1<sup>st</sup> to May 1<sup>st</sup>, over 3 million people had generated some 156 million interactions with UKIP’s content. This proved remarkably prescient for UKIP’s electoral performance: though the party returned one MP, Douglas Carswell, losing its second seat to the Conservatives, it received over 3,881,000 votes nationwide, making it the third most popular party by vote share. Following the election, the party continued to expand

its social media presence, running a Reddit ‘Ask Me Anything’ with Deputy Chairman Suzanne Evans on the r/ukipparty subreddit, which received 127 ‘upvotes’ and 371 comments.

In terms of content, 2015 had two distinct phases. For the first half of the year, the party used Facebook to support its drive for general election success. For the second half of the year, without a comparable presence in Westminster equivalent to its voter share, the party began its EU referendum campaign. In particular, the party focused on the NHS as a key election issue relative to previous years. Indeed, based on polling data, this made sense; when asked to list key issues facing themselves and family, health was consistently chosen as the second-highest, consistently chosen over 20 percent more than immigration, and from April also overtook immigration as the second-highest chosen answer when asked to list key issues facing the country as a whole (Jordan, 2015). In total, UKIP posted about the NHS 54 times in 2015, which comprised 5.6 percent of all content for the year. 45 of these posts came before the general election in May, equivalent to 8.7 percent of all content in that time. By contrast, these posts only comprised 2 percent of content from after the general election to the end of the year.

Following the election, the party shifted towards Eurosceptic content. For the first half of the year, *anti-globalisation*-coded content comprised 35.2 percent of content posted. Whilst this proportion was still relatively high, it was second in terms of overall proportion to *anti-establishment*-coded content. However, from July to December, the proportion of *anti-globalisation* content increased significantly to 63.8 percent posts. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, in his *Express* column, Farage declared the referendum “our Battle of Britain”. Almost three weeks later, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, UKIP posted their referendum campaign launch video, stating: “UKIP helped secure the EU referendum. Now help us win it.” In September, the party launched its ‘SayNoEU Tour’, promoting events with multimedia content; in total, 13 posts from September alone were materials published for the tour. Similarly, the party also aimed to put pressure on Jeremy Corbyn and supporters of Corbyn’s leadership election to campaign for Leave, claiming that

“the EU won't let us renationalise our railways” and calling for Corbyn to “maintain his dignity [and] to show a bit of backbone he used to have by taking the fight to the enemy of the poor, the EU”.<sup>16</sup> In total, 12 posts from September to December referenced Corbyn within the context of the EU campaign.

Despite focusing on different campaigns, however, the party consistently deployed anti-immigration rhetoric in their Facebook content throughout 2015. In 2014, 13.4 percent of posts were coded as *nativist*; in 2015, this rose to 24 percent of posts. Moreover, this rate was consistent throughout the year. Of the 608 posts published between January and June 2015, 22 percent were coded as *nativist*; of the 354 published between July and December, that proportion was 27.4 percent. Prior to the general election, proposed policies included imposing an Australian-style points-based immigration system, reducing access for benefits for migrants (including denying free access to treatment for migrants with HIV<sup>17</sup>) and opposing ‘state sponsored’ multiculturalism. For the EU referendum campaign, meanwhile, the party instead focused on the EU’s free movement of people, refugee crisis, and migration from Eastern Europe and Turkey. The language used in these posts often varied. In September, for instance, this message was conveyed as both ‘compassion’ for refugees (“[t]o stop the drownings we must stop the boats from coming”, posted on September 10<sup>th</sup>) to national security concerns (“[w]e must not allow our compassion to imperil our security”, posted on September 15<sup>th</sup>, in response to the Lebanese government saying that IS fighters were posing as refugees). In a video clip taken from an LBC appearance in December, Farage described EU free movement as “the free movement of Kalashnikovs and the free movement of terrorists” such as the ones “that caused all that killing and misery in Paris”. In total, over 160 posts alone referenced migration,

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<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the party at the same time published posts that referred to Corbyn as a “terrorist sympathiser” and “threat to our nation” and referred to Corbyn’s supporters as the “barmy army” during a concomitant Oldham West and Royton by-election.

<sup>17</sup> A YouGov poll that found that 50 percent of people supported Farage on the issue.

refugees or border controls, which amounted to over 66 percent of *nativist*-coded posts and over 16 percent of all posts for 2015.

#### - 2016: the EU referendum

By 2016, UKIP had stopped actively trying to grow its Facebook community and publicising its successes. Rather, the party's Facebook page appeared more invested in growing Farage's personal Facebook following. One post from March 3<sup>rd</sup>, ostensibly from Farage himself, said: "[t]hank you for 300,000 Facebook likes. If you don't like his Facebook page already, make sure you do now!" The page also shared several of Farage's live videos before publishing their own, as well as publicising his 'Safer Britain' tour during the referendum. This coincided with Michael Heaver leaving the Head of Online Engagement role to join Farage's staff as a media aide.

Naturally, the first six months were dominated by the EU referendum. Indeed, through campaigning for Leave in the referendum, contesting the Welsh Assembly and PCC elections and promoting petitions, such as the petition against using taxpayer money to fund pro-EU leaflets, over a third (35.6 percent) of content aimed to mobilise followers. This was the highest proportion of any year by 14 points. Indeed, the majority of these campaigns occurred in the first six months – in total, between January and June 2016, 47.8 percent of content in these months were coded as *mobilising* followers in some fashion.

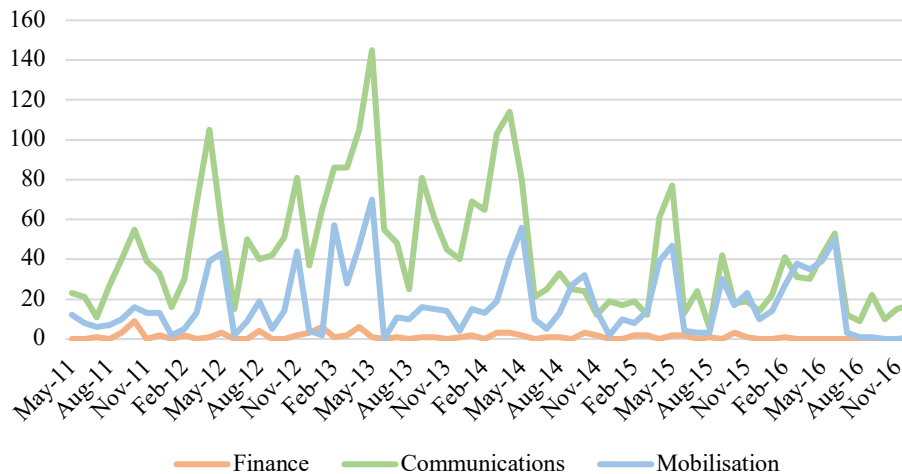
In total, 68.5 percent of content posted in 2016 was coded as *anti-globalist*, which was entirely Eurosceptic in nature. Moreover, 73.2 percent of all content posted from January to June 2016 was coded as such; this amounted to 311 out of 425 posts for those 6 months, which equated to almost 53 percent of all content for the entire year. 20 of these posts also promoted the Grassroots Out movement, the campaign associated with Nigel Farage, and supported the

organisation's bid to become the official Leave campaign in the referendum. Other pro-leave content dealt with a variety of issues. The foremost of these was the topic of migration. In total, 117 posts referenced immigration or borders; in total, *nativist*-coded content accounted for 28.8 percent of posts published throughout the year. Even after the referendum, in the months of July to December, the proportion of this content remained high, totalling 91 posts out of 162 or 56.2 percent. As Paul Nuttall stated in *the Express*: "According to the Prime Minister's timetable, the formal process of our leaving the EU will begin within the next three months. The Daily Express and UKIP must be the twin British bulldogs who make sure it does".

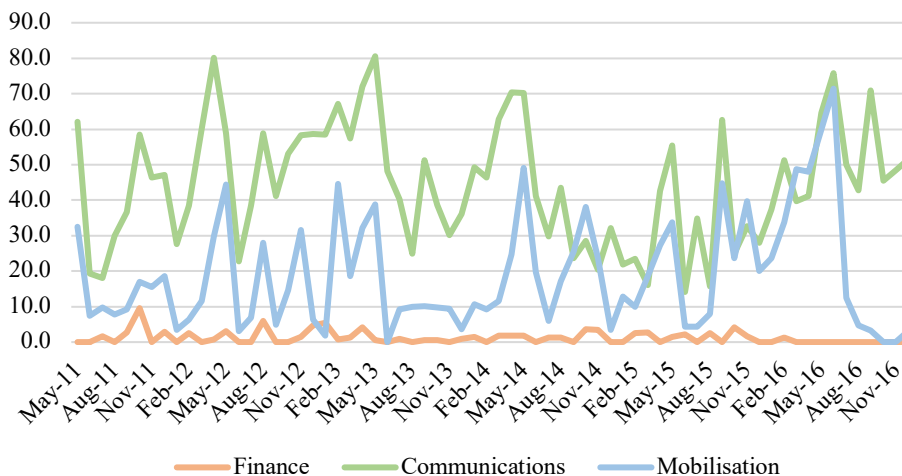
### **Turning followers to activists**

UKIP as a party, unlike Britain First, predated the concept of social media. As such, their use of social media channels, and Facebook in particular, differed from BF in several ways. In particular, UKIP began using social media much earlier than other groups, which meant that the party often learned by trial and error rather than emulating successful brands and digitally-active political parties. Even so, in June 2013, the party was looking at ways to engage prospective followers by learning from other movements and campaigns, such as Five Star in Italy, Obama's campaign in 2012 and the 2010 Calgary mayoral campaign of outsider candidate Naheed Nenshi, in particular when looking ahead to the 2014 European election (UKIP Official Channel, 2013a). However, UKIP did not use their Facebook page consistently over the period as a source of financial support, medium to mobilise supporters or news platform, but rather engaged in all aspects depending on context.

(Fig. 6.16): monthly totals of group-building output



(Fig. 6.17): monthly proportions of group-building output



The most significant difference between BF and UKIP was the use of Facebook for financial support. Promotion of means of financial support accounted for only 1.3 percent of UKIP's content between May 2011 and December 2016, which amounted to 81 posts in total. For Britain First, 4 percent of the entire corpus accounted for equivalent posts, amounting to over 1,400 posts in total, over eighteen times that of UKIP in half the time. Moreover, instances of these posts were relatively evenly spaced (fig. 6.16 and 6.17). Even in months where the number and proportion of posts 'peaked', these peaks were modest. In September and October

2011, for instance, these posts comprised 5.9 percent of content, which was only 12 out of 203 posts in total. Similarly, from January to April 2013, these posts comprised 2.8 percent of posts, or 15 out of 535 posts in total.

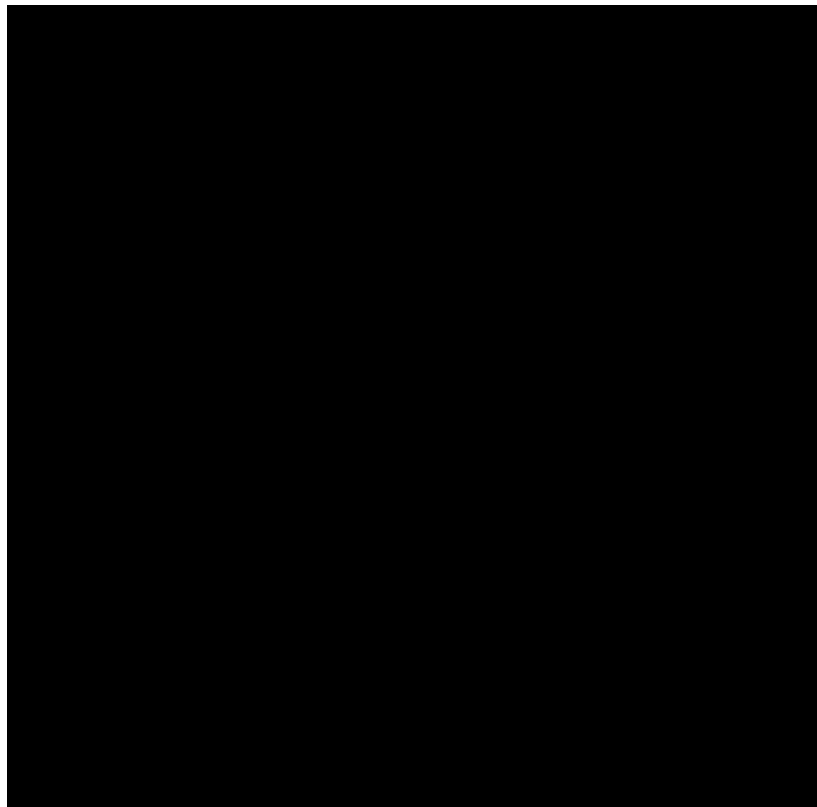
As an established political party operating for more than two decades, this is understandable. Based on Electoral Commission data, UKIP received £242,296 from 57 donors in 2011 from May to December, £314,410.08 from 66 donors in 2012, £668,829.03 from 111 donors in 2013, £3,851,453.82 from 242 donors in 2014, £3,547,744.49 from 209 donors in 2015 and £1,577,487.92 from 98 donors in 2016. Of these donations, the majority went to the central party rather than regional party offices or candidates. In total, those that went to the central party each year totalled £217,021.87 from 41 donors for 2011 from May, £259,010.08 from 38 donors in 2012, £533,973.90 from 69 donors in 2013, £3,426,784.66 from 137 donors in 2014, £3,214,435.76 from 98 donors in 2015, and £1,230,066.12 from 55 donors in 2016. Indeed, it is perhaps more surprising that the party included opportunities for donations at all. From the corpus, the biannual proportion of finance posts was highest from July to December 2011 at 3 percent, when the number of donors was relatively low; similarly, the total proportion for May to December 2011 was 2.3 percent. As the number of donors and total amount of donations increased the following year, and then increased significantly each year for the two years after, there became less and less incentive to use social media as a means of raising funds.

However, after 2011 they did not move away from Facebook as a means of raising funds altogether. Indeed, as Stuart Wheeler stated in his speech at the 2013 UKIP Party Conference in London, “[s]ince February, our reserves have diminished by more than two thirds” and that “we need money very, very badly” (UKIP Official Channel, 2013b). In his speech, Wheeler asked delegates to send donations to the party by phone there and then. Even so, social media was still used only as a secondary, supplementary source of finance, amalgamating membership and support from party donors. Typically, these posts required little



effort to publish, incorporating only text alongside an embedded link. Most often, these posts were used in conjunction with events that were already generating significant levels of public support. For example, as a preview to the series of debates on Britain's membership of the EU between Nigel Farage and Nick Clegg, UKIP posted a donation link with the text: "UKIP Leader Nigel Farage will tonight take on Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on the first of two EU debates ... You can support Nigel tonight by donating here".

Moreover, figure 6.18 demonstrates a similar example where the party sought to capitalise on their relative general election success to generate one-off donations from voters. As such, though it was not a significant part of their fundraising strategy, UKIP did recognise the advantages of social media for finance even as they had had the backing from a number of prominent donors that were much more fruitful sources of income.



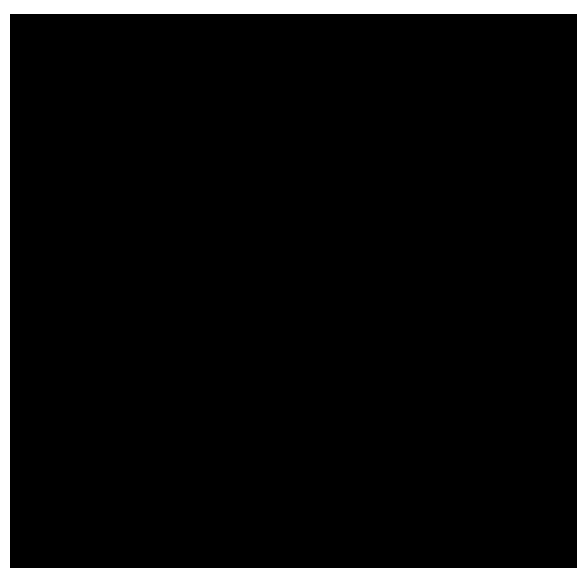
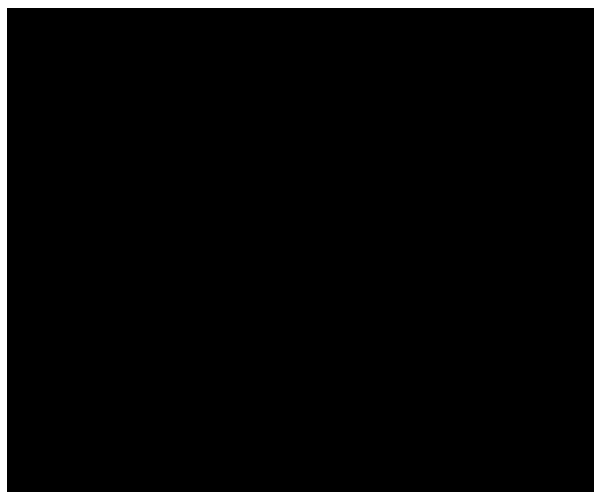
(Fig. 6.18)

Furthermore, both Facebook and YouTube were used to promote the Sovereign Draw, a lottery for individuals to win gold sovereigns and for local UKIP branches to win donations of £500, promoted with the tagline ‘a Sovereign Draw for a sovereign Britain’. According to the Electoral Commission, the Sovereign Draw raised £85,843.20 for the party between January 2013 and August 2016, or roughly £1,950 per month. In total, the party promoted the draw and highlighted several winners seven times on Facebook, stating on June 27<sup>th</sup> that “[j]oining our lottery will make a massive difference. The more players that join, the more profit we make and all profits from the lottery will go directly to UKIP.” Moreover, the party also uploaded to YouTube a video of Farage presenting the inaugural winner with a gold sovereign, “just to prove that people do actually win prizes” (UKIP Official Channel, 2012).

UKIP followed a similarly pragmatic approach when using Facebook for mobilisation. As a political party invested in electoral success, their efforts focused on these campaigns. Indeed, quantitative data for *mobilisation*-coded posts peaked in April and November 2012, between February and May 2013, May 2014, May 2015 and between March and June 2016, coinciding with the 2012 local elections and by-elections, 2013 Eastleigh by-election and local elections, the 2014 European and local elections, 2015 general election and 2016 EU referendum campaign (fig. 6.16). Less often, the party also used Facebook to promote protests and demonstrations, such as the October 11<sup>th</sup> protest to lobby Parliament for an in/out EU referendum, the March 3<sup>rd</sup> demonstration against road toll fees in the Wirral and other days of action in local areas.

On several occasions, the party also promoted other campaigns. Often, this was in the form of e-petitions. In November 2011, for instance, the party posted several times to promote its petition on immigration, which was followed in subsequent years by petitions to reject new EU migrants, reject open borders with Romania and Bulgaria and to oppose EU freedom of movement. In March 2012, the party also used Facebook to promote their e-petition in support

of Christopher Tappin, a retired businessman extradited by the UK to the US on terrorism charges for allegedly selling batteries to Iran for surface-to-air missiles, alongside speaking to local media (BBC, 2012a). Subsequently, the party also launched an e-petition in August 2012 calling for the removal and banning of onshore windfarms anywhere in the UK that was promoted over the next couple of years. Throughout the period, the party shared other petitions including making setting up a traveller pitch without permission illegal, supporting electoral reform to have proportional representation in Parliament and a regional assembly in England, to release the Chilcott Report and to be involved in the 2015 general election live television debates. Finally, the page also shared links to local campaigns, such as petitions to save local services such as Wisbech post office, Deeside care home and Culver Centre (a school for vulnerable children) and to build a new grammar school in Merton.

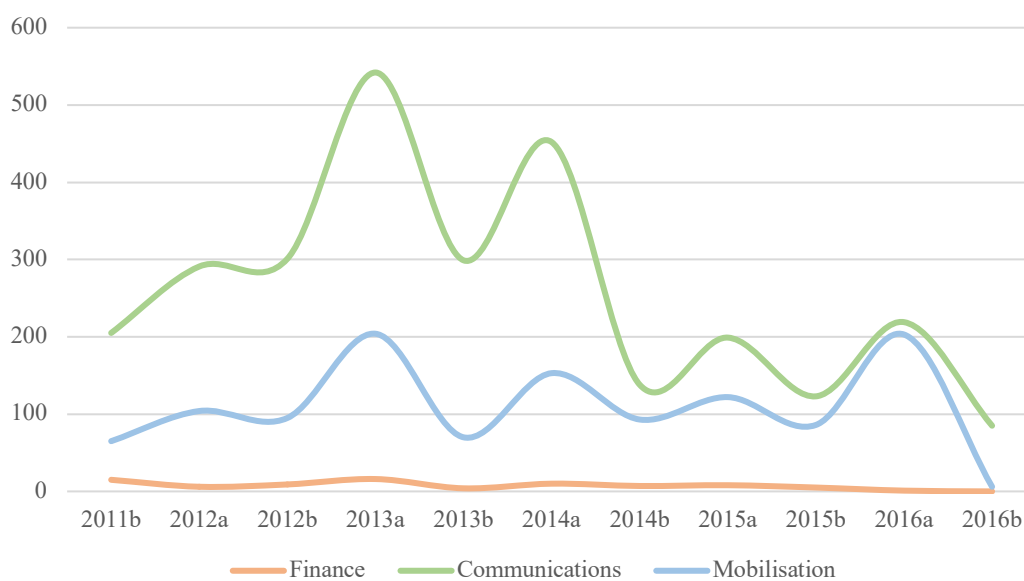


(Figs. 6.19 and 6.20)

However, one form of content that UKIP were particularly active in sharing through Facebook was group news and communications. Primarily, this was done through links, either to local and national press or to their owned or affiliated websites. However, the party also used other mediums to promote its work. Videos, such as figure 6.17, were used to promote

the work of party leaders, contributions to debates in the European Parliament, highlights from TV and radio appearances and election related materials such as videos of candidates campaigning. Text-only statuses were also used to provide dates and times of upcoming broadcast appearances to ensure viewership for these programmes were as high as possible, both for relatively routine appearances such as on shows like *Daily Politics* and *Sky News* as well as more significant events such as *Question Time* and scheduled debates.

(Fig. 6.21) Six-month cumulative totals of group-building content



However, these posts underpinned a significant portion of UKIP's Facebook strategy, and for months when there was less news or less need for Facebook as a conduit for party news, total output also fell. As with the total amount published, a line of demarcation can be drawn in mid-2014. Though the proportion of party news relative to output remained consistent after this time (fig. 6.17), both the monthly (fig. 6.16) and biannual (fig. 6.21) totals fell significantly from July 2014 onwards. In the first half of 2014, 452 posts were coded as *party news and communications* (out of 771 total posts); in the second half of 2014, this fell to 138 posts (out of 468). Indeed, for the months of March, April and May 2014, in the lead up and immediate aftermath of the successful European and local elections, 103, 114 and 80 posts respectively

were coded as *party news and communications*. For the months between June and October 2014, however, monthly totals fell to 21, 25, 33, 25 and 24 respectively, before falling even further to 12, 19, 17, 19 and 12 respectively from December 2014 to March 2015. When considered alongside previous examinations of UKIP's total output relative to news coverage, the party clearly only used Facebook consistently as a platform to disseminate party news before it received such high levels of coverage.

### **Concluding remarks**

Unlike Britain First, UKIP's use of social media did not increase year on year. Rather, UKIP's Facebook output began to decline from mid-2014 following their ground-breaking European elections success, which also significantly increased the party's news coverage. UKIP also began to phase out the official YouTube channel, instead only hosting videos taken from conference. The only page that remained active was the UKIP MEPs YouTube channel, likely because the channel was operated separately from the domestic agenda channels. Moreover, UKIP's overall use of Facebook in particular was much more limited than Britain First's. From this, we can hypothesise that the benefits of a social media platform, relying primarily on organic reach to a public audience, diminish with increases in traditional media coverage. The following chapter shall undertake qualitative analysis into the content that BF and UKIP disseminated to their followers to provide a closer examination of the narratives and tropes each group used.

## Chapter 7

### Britain First Qualitative Analysis

#### Introduction

The final two chapters shall now examine specific pieces of content in more detail. The first two sections of this chapter shall examine content form. Britain First tailored content for social media, and this reflected a deeper consideration for both their platform and audience. Therefore, this chapter shall first examine Britain First's use of both established memes and meme conventions to optimise their content for social media audiences. Second, this chapter shall look closer specific visual techniques for creating content, particularly the use of light and dark visual elements and how this contrast created striking visual content. Though the group posted daily images, videos and other content to their followers regardless of context, often these posts reflected specific group campaigns. The third section of this chapter shall consider three campaigns that were prominent parts of Britain First's online and offline activism. These campaigns are the 'Ban the Burka' campaign, the campaign in the wake of the Rotherham scandal, and the 'London's Last Stand' London mayoral election campaign.

#### Impact and political memes

Britain First's use of memes was a cornerstone of their strategy to optimise their propaganda for social media. Gal, Shifman and Kampf define memes as "groups of items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created, transformed, and circulated by many participants through digital participatory platforms"

(2016: 1700). Memes emerge in a disorderly, chaotic manner, before settling on an agreed-upon form and meaning through “societal and communal coordination” (Ross and Rivers, 2017: 286; see also Nisenbaum and Shifman, 2015: 3). Memes emerge in many formats, including gifs, videos, text and photos. The most recognisable and easiest made and shared is the ‘image macro’, which refers to a meme formed from a picture and subtitles forming a recurring catchphrase. Typically, the subtitles make use of the distinctive outlined white typeface ‘Impact’ so much that “the meme font itself has become a meme” through audience expectations for memes “to look a certain way” (Edwards, 2015).

Though memes originated as a cultural phenomenon, inevitably they have seeped into political discourse through social media. Ross and Rivers describe the importance of memes to political discourse as “[representing] a tool within the wider social media framework that permits creative content sharing with a political slant” (2017: 285). For Grundlingh, “[e]ven though memes are often jokes, they can communicate important information and opinions” (2017). Grundlingh conceptualises memes as speech acts, insofar as they constitute both a production of sounds or words (or visuals) to perform a function (the illocutionary act) with intended and unintended effects (the perlocutionary act). BF memes were typically ‘expositives’<sup>18</sup> (Austin, 1962), which expound views and conduct arguments.

Propaganda posted often throughout the corpus were constructed as memes. One that was shared several times played upon themes of immigrants imposing their own norms upon those of the ‘native’ culture by incorporating it into a well-known image macro (fig. 7.1). As with all memes, this image used humour to reinforce an underlying ideological point. As Ross and Rivers note, “[o]ne of the most significant characteristics of Internet memes is the use of humor to communicate a social or political critique or commentary ... in the form of irony,

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<sup>18</sup> Other types include ‘verdictives’ (delivering findings), ‘exercitives’ (deciding for or against a course of action), ‘commissives’ (committing to a course of action) and ‘behabitives’ (expressions of attitudes) (Austin, 1962).

satire, sarcasm, or parody, subtle or otherwise” (2017: 288). The growing prevalence of memes in political discourse is underpinned by this humour: first, humour allows memes to be both an overt and discrete source of political critique and commentary; second, it makes them more relatable to audiences not necessarily interested in politics (2017: 288).



(Fig. 7.1)

The meme itself, titled ‘Condescending Wonka’, features actor Gene Wilder in a scene from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. Typically, the meme features Wilder as the eponymous Wonka looking bemused alongside a sarcastic or patronising caption. Regardless, the use of the Wonka character is an example of the intertextuality of memes and the relationship with other texts, which is another significant characteristic of memes in general (Ross and Rivers, 2017). The first line of the meme features a scene-setting description of some person or group that will become the subject of ridicule, with the second line sarcastically imploring that person or group to tell the audience (represented by Wilder) something that is obvious or shows the person or group in question to be mis- or uninformed. The correct use of this particular meme requires an understanding of what the Wonka meme represents beyond



understanding of the image source itself, as in the scene that the image is captured from, Wonka is not intentionally being patronising or condescending, but rather, mischievously showing off an invention from his factory (Klee, 2016). As such, sarcasm is conveyed by more than just the cultural context of the scene from which the image was taken. In this example, sarcasm was explicitly signposted by the first word of the first line (“oh”), and the first word of the second line (an insincere “please”). As such, the frame itself forms an integral, unspoken part of the image that only one familiar with the meme would understand.

Using this particular meme in this context is an example of the final characteristic of political memes from Ross and Rivers: namely, that irony, satire, parody and sarcasm are most effectively used in efforts of delegitimisation against oppositional individuals, groups and institutions rather than as messages of affirmation or support (2017: 289). The use of sarcasm in Britain First’s instance has two dimensions. First, it presents immigrants as demanding that ‘native’ culture give way to the traditions of the culture of immigrants. Situating this premise within the Wonka meme presents this premise as worthy of condescension and lacking common sense. This is demonstrated overtly by the imagined dialogue between the ‘native’, who is embodied by the sarcastic dialogue, to the stereotyped migrants. The use of “my country” and “your culture” reinforces heritage within and ownership over the very culture that the literal and metaphorical ‘Other’ seeks to control. As such, the sarcasm delegitimises immigration on the premise that migrants are demanding that British “schools and traditions” should accommodate the “needs” of migrants. Second, the meme also implicitly delegitimises the actions of certain ‘natives’ – the ‘Us’ – to accept the premise of cultural change allegedly posited by the aforementioned migrants. Though it is not stated explicitly, the meme itself implies that this has already occurred, both for the meme itself to make sense (given that it must be perceived to be true by the audience) and because of the caption, which itself affirms “[a]in’t this the truth!”. This is reaffirmed by other BF content, which label liberals and elites

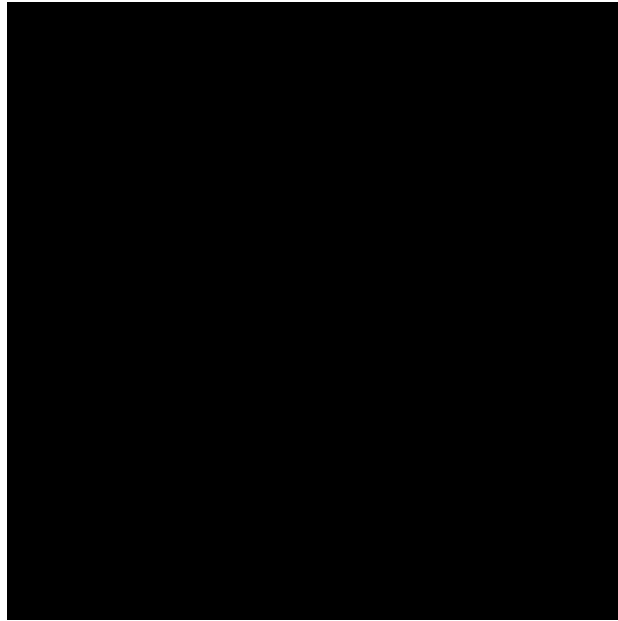
in particular as “immigrant loving” and “Muslim appeasers” (evoking Nazi appeasement from the interwar period) who make BF followers feel like “second class citizens in our own country”.

By delegitimising the arguments of political opponents, Britain First give credence to their own ideological positions. Framing these within a widely-used meme attempts to similarly confer such commonality on otherwise controversial nativist, nationalist opinions, and encouraging it to spread widely. Thus, even beyond their choice of language and imagery, grounding ideological positions within the broader cultural framework and subtext of memes legitimises the group’s ideological positions for wider consumption. Presenting content in this way evidences a conscious choice to conform to norms of internet communication more broadly when communicating their own messages.

Other memes aimed to delegitimise political opponents directly. Figure 7.2 demonstrates how Britain First’s use of memes was also emblematic of a deeper awareness of internet culture through the ‘What People Think I Do/What I Really Do’ meme. Examining the constituent parts of the meme, ‘What I Really Do’ clearly follows established conventions of joke telling, with a frame, setup and punchline. The meme arranges several images, usually bland, obvious stock imagery, arrayed against a black background, which acts as the frame (like how knock knock jokes are framed through an established call/response). Through this repeated form, the meme primes the audience for an expected setup and payoff. These images all nominally reference commonly-held perceptions or preconceptions of a person, group, object or event (the ‘what people think I do’ part), which form the meme’s set-up. These preconceptions are then undercut by the final image, the meme’s punchline, that (theoretically) conveys the actuality and reality of the thing in question, which is typically much more mundane and (self-)deprecating than the stereotype. The punchline often doubles as an ‘in-joke’ between the creator/sharer and their peers.



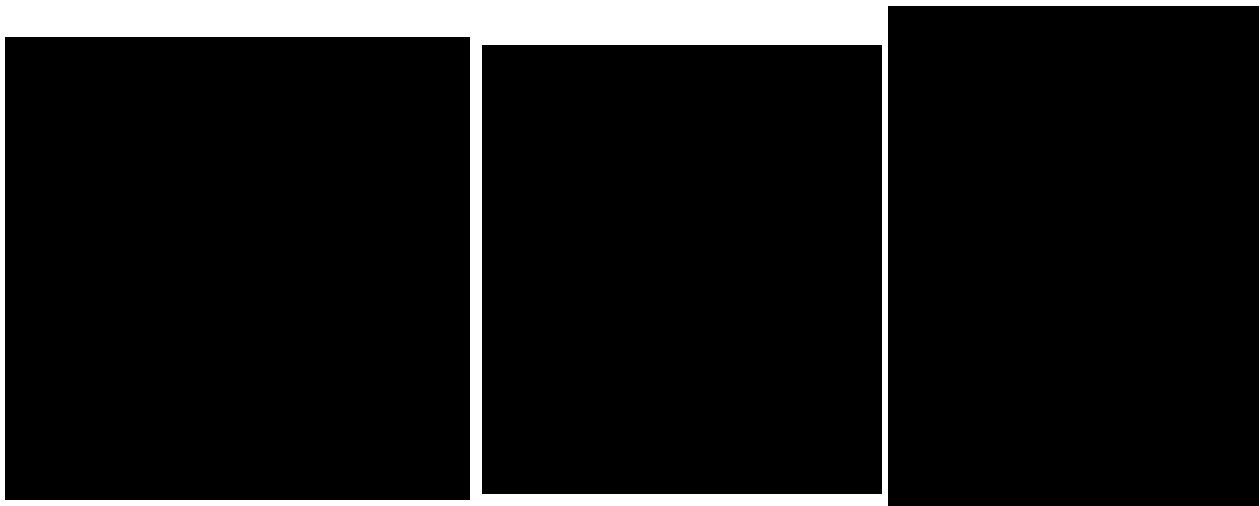
(Fig. 7.2)



Instead of this traditional set-up, however, Britain First post, entitled ‘Lefties’, deviated significantly for effect. The meme they shared instead featured four images with the captions ‘How your friends/family/the world see/s you’ and ‘How you really are’; the pictures themselves displayed four crying children, without the build-up typical of other reproductions of the meme (fig. 7.2). When described in this way, the point of the meme clearly is to delegitimise the politics of ‘lefties’ as that of cry-babies, which itself casts ‘lefties’ as inarticulate, theatrical and superficial. The framing of political opponents as such evokes the deprecating cultural conceptualisation of the millennial generation as ‘generation snowflake’. The term snowflake itself refers to “an overly sensitive or easily offended person” who “self-righteously [believe] that they are as precious and unique as snowflakes” (Whitaker, 2017: 60).

In so doing, however, Britain First demonstrated an understanding of the set-up and pay off of the meme to subvert expectations. Rather than mistaking the meme’s punchline, this reconfiguration provided a meta-punchline for someone who would also understand what to expect from the typical format of other ‘What I Really Do’ memes. Indeed, the meta-punchline arguably loses its actual payoff without the understanding and expectation of the original meme

structure; it also subverts the original meme's in-joke, moving the subject of the joke from self-deprecation to the deprecation of others. Whilst this meme was not the most significant in terms of engagement that the group shared, and the actual creator of this particular meme is ambiguous, it nonetheless demonstrated that the party clearly recognised the importance of memes and understood the cultural norms that mediated internet communication.



(Figs. 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5)

Interspersed were other images that were not actual memes, but nonetheless relied on audience awareness of memes to create impactful content. These other images were not memes, as they were not socially or collaboratively constructed and typically did not incorporate humour, but nonetheless copied the aesthetics of memes in several ways. Three images (figs. 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5) incorporated the characteristics of traditional image macros, with background picture, split captions and 'Impact' typeface with heavy shading. These images were shared several times and accumulated hundreds of thousands of engagements in total. However, none of these images featured a culturally-relevant background picture to form what could be considered an image macro meme. Rather, the picture element of each image simply illustrated and reinforced the statement being made, rather than contributing to the mutual framing of the text in the way that the memes described above did. As such, these images lacked the

intertextuality of other image macros, the pertained to other texts such as films for cultural context that underpinned their meaning.

The Rotherham-related image (fig. 7.3) attempted to incorporate humour to send a political message. This image featured a photograph of an empty street, accompanied by the caption “look at all the moderate Muslims protesting about the rape of 1400 young girls in Rotherham”. By contrasting the photo and ironic statement, the post critiques the conceptualisation of “moderate Muslims” as distinct from ‘radical Muslims’ and the perpetrators of sexual violence in Rotherham. Whilst the term ‘moderate Muslim’ specifically has been criticised within liberal discourse on the basis that it implies that being moderate is antithetical to being devout (Manzoor, 2015), the illocutionary act of the image aims to delegitimise the broader evidence for politically divergent views amongst religious Muslims (see Achilov and Sen, 2016) and posit the caricature of Muslims as a unique danger (Alstrope, 2015). Unlike established meme forms, the background image does not rely on intertextuality with other memes, but instead relies on intertextuality with texts that reproduce discourses concerning the construction of concepts of ‘radical/extreme’ and ‘moderate Muslims’.

Neither of the capital punishment images (figs. 7.4 and 7.5) used punchline humour in the same way. Only the first image, which read “the cure for pedophilia [*sic*]” emboldened above an image of an electric chair, attempted to evoke humour deriving from the contradiction of the use of the word ‘cure’, implying, in this context, an attempt to reform future behaviour of an individual, and the permanence of death and non-existence of a deceased individual that would entail execution by electric chair. The statement and image also implicitly critique sending convicted paedophiles to prison to rehabilitate them for reintegration into society by instead asserting that only death can reform such people. In this instance, the delegitimising/legitimising comparative is drawn between an ‘ineffective’ criminal justice system based on rehabilitation and an alternative based on capital punishment. The words are

emphasised by the vivid colours of the room and chair, with the lighting emphasising the chair itself and casting a shadow over the wall behind. These visual elements create a sense of foreboding, which, in this context, is framed as positive, as it underlines the power of the chair itself over life and death.

The second image, on the other hand, makes use of a straightforward imperative sentence structure to advocate the public hangings for paedophiles and rapists. The statement itself notably chooses an imperative structure without politeness strategies to mediate the bluntness of the sentence. Auxiliary verbs such as ‘we should’ or ‘Britain should’ or cohortatives such as ‘let’s’ are omitted entirely. Visually, the text is accompanied by an illustration of gallows in a rainy town square. Whilst the illustration is less perhaps less provocative than the vivid electric chair, the same severity and grimness of capital punishment is conveyed by the bleak, muted, foreboding grey and brown colour palette, the pathetic fallacy of the rain and rain clouds, and the isolation of the gallows against the inhabited buildings in the distance. Rather, the most striking visual element was the text “BRING BACK”. Rather than focusing on the actual subject of the image – “bring back public hangings”, for instance, frontloads the ‘public hangings’ aspect – Britain First instead chose to emphasise the phrasal verb instead. When combined with the visual hierarchy of the two words, the emphasis on the first line instead harkened ‘back’ grounds the image in idealised traditions of the past.

As with the Condescending Wonka and What I Really Do macros, these images also aim to delegitimise opposing political positions. However, all differed from those memes in several ways. First, both of the capital punishment images explicitly advocated specific policy positions; the delegitimation of rehabilitative criminal justice is also implied following positions advocated explicitly in the text. Only the Rotherham image delegitimises the concept of ‘moderate Muslims’ as a primary focus. Second, humour was almost completely absent from the capital punishment images. Delegitimation did not stem from satire, sarcasm, parody or

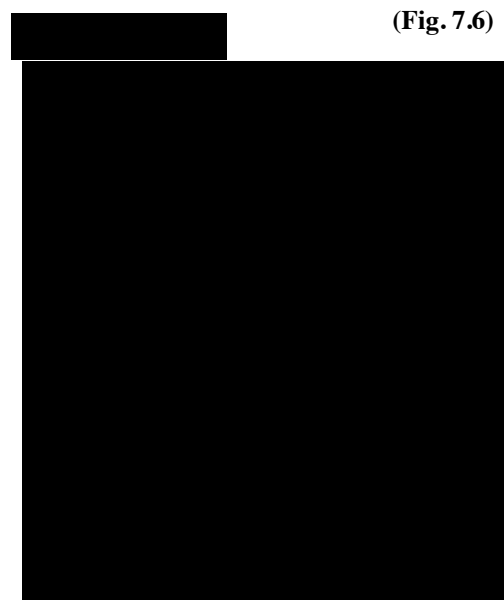
irony, but either from dark humour or invocations of the past. The background images of both, as has been discussed, were designed to be provocative and controversial. This is corroborated by the fact that both of these were accompanied by the text “[d]o [you/YOU] agree” as an accompanying caption (and, in the case of the ‘cure’ image, also in the image text). In both instances, therefore, Britain First sought to further legitimise their messages through social media engagements. The quantifiable mobilisation and direct participation of the audience in this way was enabled only by the functions inherent to social media.

### **Contrasting light and darkness**

Though Britain First consistently denied that the party was racist (and many pieces of content were dedicated to reinforcing this message), nativist themes often emerged throughout the corpus. Contemporary radical right groups have often proved difficult to categorise due to an almost uniform disavowal of racism in words if not in deeds. Groups such as BF have carefully avoided tropes that have historically been associated with far-right parties, such as overt anti-Semitism. Similar to groups such as the EDL (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015: 174), BF have consistently denied that their criticism of Islam and immigration is based upon biological or genetic determinism and have repeatedly distanced themselves from the “Nazi crap” and the “racist crap” of the BNP in particular (British Fight Back, 2014). The group have conspicuously posted videos, photos and blog posts, for instance, featuring black and Eastern European supporters, whilst also emphasising, for instance, their solidarity with British Sikhs (albeit against Islam) and the rights of Gurkha soldiers in the British Army.

That being said, as with related groups (including the EDL), Britain First’s content did employ exclusionary discourses. Whilst these posts have been captured quantitatively by the

discussion in Chapter 5, these manifested in a variety of ways. BF often emphasised sociological factors that preclude assimilation and co-habitation. Despite the techno-determinist conceptualisation of social media benefitting either progressive, globalist or establishment agendas, BF consistently opposed religious diversity, immigration and multiculturalism. However, these perspectives were often racialised, implicitly or otherwise, adding a white/non-white dimension to the ‘us’/‘them’ dichotomy. This binary was often represented or reinforced visually by the contrast between light and dark in image-based content.



(Fig. 7.6)

Figure 7.6, for instance, demonstrates how Islam is constructed by Britain First as intrusive and ‘Other’ to Britain. In the post, the main image depicts a white convert to Islam, who holds up a (photoshopped) sign saying, “I am a traitor to my own people”. The image is accompanied by an unreferenced statistic asserting that there are “an estimated 250,000 British converts to Islam in the UK”. Notably, this ‘estimate’ is 2 and a half times the 100,000 estimate of inter-faith think-tank Faith Matters and over ten times that of other estimates (Taylor and Morrison, 2011). Whilst the image directly puts British culture and Islam at odds, it also



racialises the issue. The words “my own people” in particular imply a contrast between a white British in-group and the non-white, non-British Islamic out-group. Similarly, the brevity of the term “traitor” underlines the stakes in the conflict between them. This assertion was then mutually supported and supportive of other BF content, such as various videos that supposedly ‘witnessed’ anti-social, violent or threatening acts attributed to non-white Muslim migrants.



(Fig. 7.7)

Britain First often combined the contrast of lightness and darkness and the use of pronouns to construct binary in- and out-groups, particularly native/non-native, white/non-white, British/immigrant and Christian/Muslim. The technique of contrasting light and dark in particular has often been deployed and observed in radical right texts produced by several different groups across Europe (Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Engström, 2014). One image attempted to play to public preconceptions about effect of immigration on schools (fig. 7.7). This image aimed to visually reproduce a common trope about the number of schoolchildren speaking English as a second language, which played on wider fears of immigration and declining birth rates as an existential threat to white British majority within the UK. This

particular trope was articulated several times between 2013 and 2016 (and indeed after) by several different newspapers and public figures. In 2013, for instance, the *Daily Mail* ran a headline that stated “[m]ore than one million schoolchildren don’t speak English as their native language” (Gardner, 2013). Similar stories also featured on BBC News (2013) and in the *Sunday Times* (Hurst, 2015) and *Sun* (Davidson, 2016). The *Times* story especially framed this as an existential threat to the school system with the headline “Schools struggling as more pupils can’t speak English” (Hurst, 2016). Several prominent British politicians also referred to this in media appearances, such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, with the former describing it as “a disaster” (Watt, 2015).

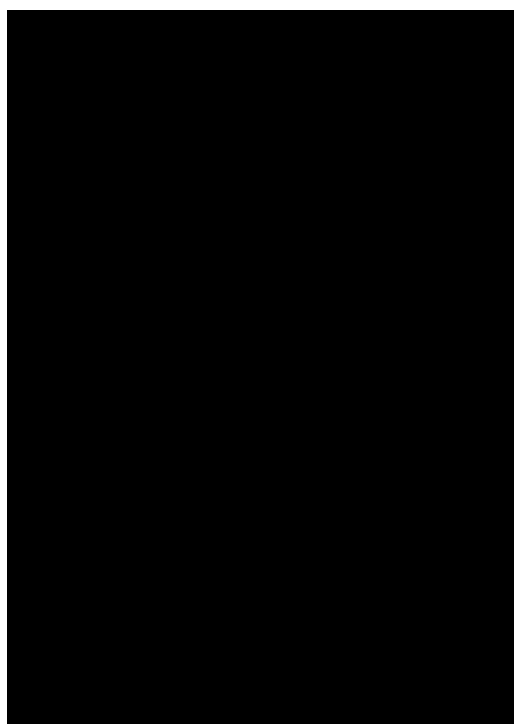
In terms of Britain First’s use of this trope, figure 7.7 emphasised this issue through two dimensions of their imagery. The first dimension was the superimposed text in the lower third of the black background. Again, the use of the distinctive white Impact typeface references standard internet meme forms. The second dimension was the image itself, depicting a typical class photo of twenty-five schoolchildren of various racial and ethnic identities. Proximate to each child is a red box, supposedly labelling each child’s first language, representing languages across the world including Portuguese, Czech, Yoruba, Urdu and Nepalese. On the wall behind, the audience can clearly see a Union flag itself, with bunting and stickers along the wall, clearly demonstrating that the class is in the UK. At the picture’s centre stands the class’s only “English/Irish” child; the photo’s composition places further emphasis on her due to her light green dress, contrasted with the dark green and dark grey jumpers and trousers of the other children. Moreover, her white complexion similarly contrasts against the children of colour around her. The child’s position reproduces the message – “our own language a minority in our own land!” – of the image both literally and metaphorically, surrounded and outnumbered by racial and cultural ‘Others’. Depicting the solitary

‘English/Irish’ child in this fashion follows in the tradition of depicting immigrants as ‘masses’ and as an existential threat to ‘our’ culture (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 49).

Whilst this image clearly replicates the fears of the news articles described above, several aspects must be analysed critically. John Richardson and Ruth Wodak (2009) describe five strategies for positive self-presentation and the negative representation of others. One strategy, which relies on “*perspectivation, framing or discourse representation ... [to] express their involvement in discourse*” (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 48), manifests in the way that the class is described. Here, the image creator frames the situation as “English as a first language being a minority”, rather than framing the children instead as having evident linguistic skills. The final strategy, and perhaps the most relevant, are the *intensifying strategies*, which “help to qualify or modify the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of utterances” (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 48). This manifests in several ways. First, the photo itself was clearly carefully chosen to demonstrate the ‘native minority’ angle. Given that white British people who consider English to be their first language remain a clear majority within the UK, the typicality of both photo and claim that “[o]ur own language [is] a minority in our own land” is questionable. Second, labelling each child by their supposed first language intensifies the message of the photo. Moreover, the addition of labels attempts to pre-empt and delegitimise any counter-argument that the first language of each child is ambiguous.

Third, despite the labels, it should still be questioned how the creator knew which child spoke which language as their first language, despite the assertions of the text. This is demonstrated clearly by inconsistencies with several labels that betray a lack of knowledge. First, many children are listed contradictorily as having multiple first languages. One child, for instance, is labelled as having Arabic, Dutch and Sudanese as first languages; another is labelled as Arabic and Dutch; a third child is listed as Tamil and French. Whilst it is possible

that all these children spoke all of these languages as well as English, it would be disingenuous not to therefore include English in these labels (as the labels for these children demonstrate that the labels do not necessarily show first languages, and it is reasonable to assume all the schoolchildren speak it) or to not present the children simply as being multilingual. Indeed, the former is even more egregious as the sole English speaker is also labelled as Irish-speaking. Moreover, another child is labelled as ‘Jamaican Patois’, which is a dialect of English. Finally, a child is labelled as speaking Khachi, which is either a misspelling (perhaps referencing the language Kutchi, from Kutch, India) or mistake (Kachhi being a variety of Thali dialect of Lahnda).



(Fig. 7.8)

Another popular, recurring image used similar principles to emphasise its message (fig. 7.8). The image itself juxtaposes two photos. A reverse image search reveals the top photo, a black and white image stock image, to be a group of young, white schoolboys playing conkers in a 1950s playground. The stock image label can even be seen in the bottom left of the top photo, obscured by the added text. The bottom image, meanwhile, features seven modern

young people of colour on what appears to be a housing estate. The overt illocutionary act of the image is to “smash cultural Marxism”, transliterated in threatening, bold, red capital letters and imposed over the bottom of the second photo. Across the middle, two lines of text mourn the supposed decline of “our nations” and “our societies”.

As with the previous image, this post aimed to draw a distinction between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. The use of the pronoun “our” to describe the nations and societies in decline also underpinned the construction of “us” with reference to “them/their”, in the same way that the previous image referenced “our own language” and “our own land”. Similarly, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ clearly distinguished between the white and non-white subjects of each photo respectively without explicitly saying as such. Unlike the previous image, however, which demonstrated othering through the spatial arrangements of the English/Irish girl surrounded by ‘Others’, this image instead used the contrast between the two separate photos to demonstrate otherisation by the passage of time. This alleged decline was reinforced by rhetorical questioning (“[w]hat happened”) and the transition from monochrome to colour photography, clearly visually and verbally referencing some passing of time since the idealised first image, contrasted with the brickwork background implying continuity of location. The image also follows a similar style to a BNP campaign leaflet analysed by John Richardson and Ruth Wodak (2009). As with the BNP’s ‘Londoner’ leaflet, the idealised community of the monochrome photograph is metaphorically reinforced through the brightness and openness of the setting. Furthermore, the *bokeh* aesthetic, the quality of blurring the background, of the photograph imbues it with a literal and metaphorical sense of depth and a dreamlike context, again playing to the reification of the past. On the other hand, the background of the bottom image remains in sharp focus, allowing the audience to see every mark on the brown wall, emphasising the theme of deterioration and decay.

Examining the subjects in more detail, it becomes increasingly apparent how the image portrays an idealised version of British society in relation to what is presented as ‘actual’. Indeed, the top image has also featured in other media nostalgic for 50s society, notably in a *Daily Mail* article describing “the magic of Fifties suburbia” (Hanson, 2012). Closer analysis demonstrates how this supposed ‘actual’ image instead resorts to orientalisising tropes about the influence of people of colour and modern society. In the top picture, for instance, the children are dressed smartly in school uniform, with at least two wearing shirts and ties even in the playground, suggesting adherence to rules. The modern children, meanwhile, are dressed in hoodies, bandanas, do-rags and baseball caps. Clothing has often been collocated with constructions of racism and classism; contrasted with the school uniform, the hoodie represents a criminal and monstrous other. With reference to the tropes that structure racial profiling in Western societies, Mimi Thi Nguyen notes, “[i]n the optics of the profile, through which *the visual is fully schematized by racism*, the hoodie first signals a possible threat and second renders the potential criminal visible” (2015). Within the UK, the hoodie has come to embody the idea of Broken Britain and “the collapse of the social contract in British society” (Featherstone, 2013), creating a ‘thugocracy’ that needs to be regulated by surveillance and policing (Bell, 2013).

Moreover, the 1950s schoolchildren are content playing with their conkers, whilst other children look on happily. The modern children, meanwhile, sit in or stand around a red car, whilst one stands on the hood of the car aiming a piece of metal as though it was a firearm. Clearly, the contrast here is between the string-and-conker toy, providing entertainment to the 1950s children, and to the car in the modern photo, suggesting some decadent and indulgent moral bankruptcy. Similarly, the children in the top photo are seen smiling to one another, engrossed in the game, oblivious to the camera, reinforcing a sense of intimacy, community and acceptance. The modern children pout, scowl and throw up ‘gun finger’ gang signs for the

camera's benefit, suggesting delinquency, criminality and the threat of violence. It should not be understated that, given that the top image is a stock photo, it was probably chosen because of its broad potential usage, which would be underpinned by its quality, setting and genial tone. The bottom photo, meanwhile, suggests one taken to show off to friends, which would explain the exaggeration of the photo's subjects' portrayal of themselves. Because the posted image attempts to present these photos as equivalents, the context in which they were taken has been removed.

### **Promoting campaigns**

Though memes (actual and emulated) were clearly an important aspect of Britain First's social media strategy, they were not the only way BF made use of Facebook's architectural bias towards visual media to transmit messages. Social media is distinctive in that it theoretically allows users to post content faster and more cost-effectively than was previously possible by traditional means, though business insights do suggest that algorithmic arrangements deprioritise pages that post excessively or spam followers (Stillman, 2018). BF in particular made considerable use of this functionality (discussed in Chapter 5), posting over a thousand times a month at its peak. Unsurprisingly, the group posted a wide range of content to posit most of its political positions, or otherwise used different posts to use different framings or focus on different aspects of a single political position. These different aspects were most apparent when examining particular campaigns.

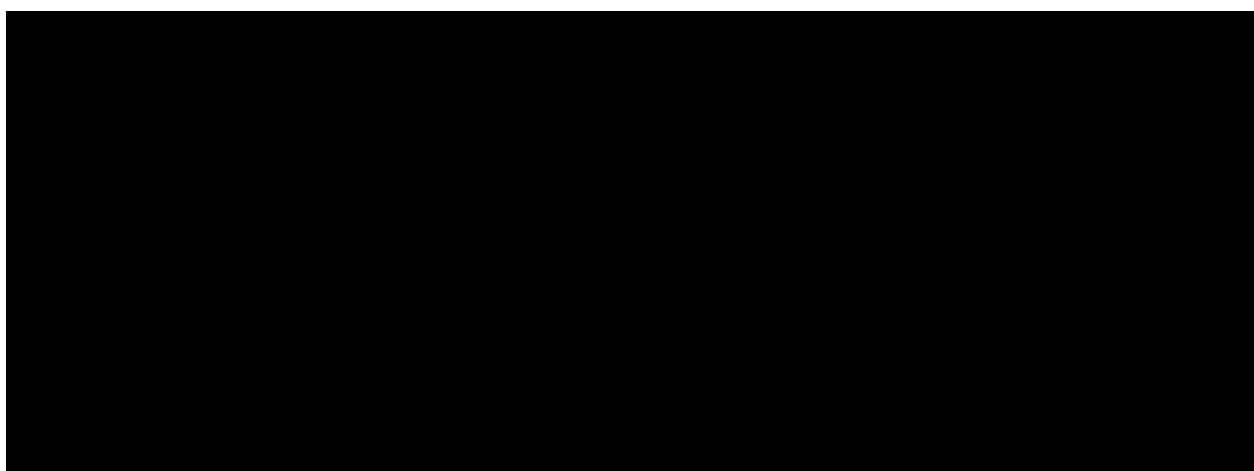
#### **- Ban the Burqa campaign**

Britain First posts campaigning to ban the practice occurred consistently throughout the corpus, despite the fact that this particular interpretation of hijab (a broader concept of modesty in the Quran) is typically only worn by a minority of women. BF's emphasis on the hijab in their content is not unique, but instead reflects the broader obsession with veiled women as "*the* key visual symbol of Islam in the West" in political discourse, visually embodying "the 'abnormal' [or] a 'stranger among us'", gender oppression and inequality, religious extremism and the threat of terrorism (Zempi, 2018). This campaign was often alliteratively referred to as the 'Ban the Burka' campaign, despite the fact that most images actually depicted the niqab. 'Ban the Burka', rather, related to the group's opposition to Islam and immigration and their cultural and biological prejudice more broadly. Broader criticism of the niqab, burka and chador in Western politics and media has itself been critiqued within academic discourse as leading to the orientalisation, inferiorisation and securitisation of Islam and Muslim identity, perpetuating anti-Muslim hatred and the 'white saviour' narrative, and infantilising and criminalising Muslim women specifically as people in need of saving (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008; Amin-Khan, 2012).

The campaign did not engage with Muslim voices on either side of the debate. Rather, a significant proportion of the campaign was devoted to publicising several petitions, including a total ban on the practice and specific bans for public places and in schools. The majority of posts, however, were images, shared news stories and videos aimed to set out BF's stance, delegitimise the practice and invoke various arguments against its use. The majority of these posts also incorporated informal calls to action, such as "share if you think/agree", which encouraged the virality of these images (figs. 7.9 and 7.10). As Lee and Littler conclude regarding informal types of digital engagement, though the impact of these images going viral from a macropolitical, electoral perspective was likely minimal, it likely had social, political and legal consequences at the individual level (2015: 27-8). Indeed, in a study on the lived

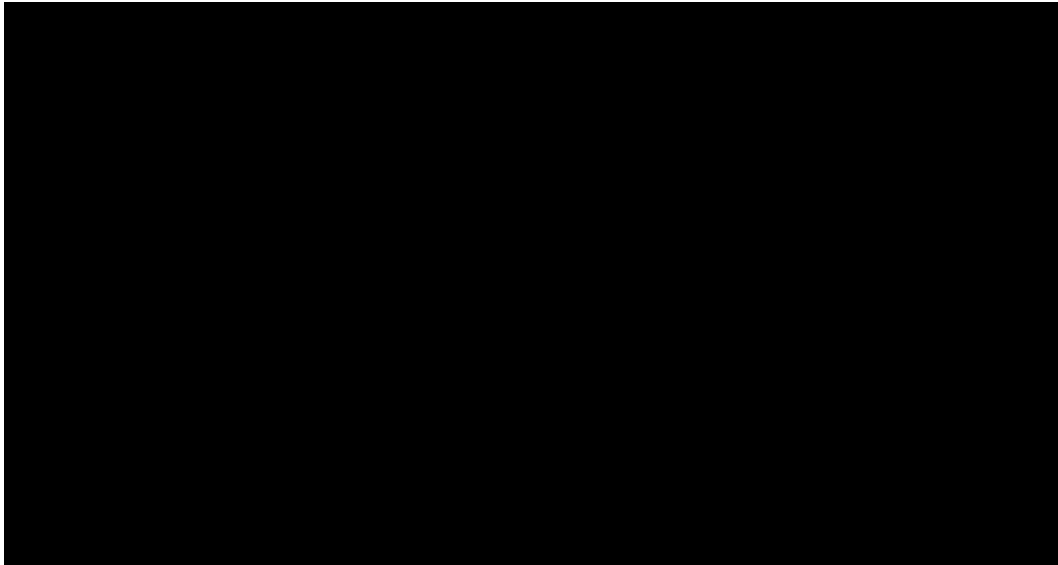


experiences of veiled Muslim women, many described intimidation and harassment they received on digital platforms including Facebook, Twitter, blogs and chatrooms as well as the verbal and physical abuse they received in public as motivated by the types of tropes that Britain First perpetuated (Zempi, 2018: 69).



(Left to right: figs. 7.9, 7.10 and 7.11)

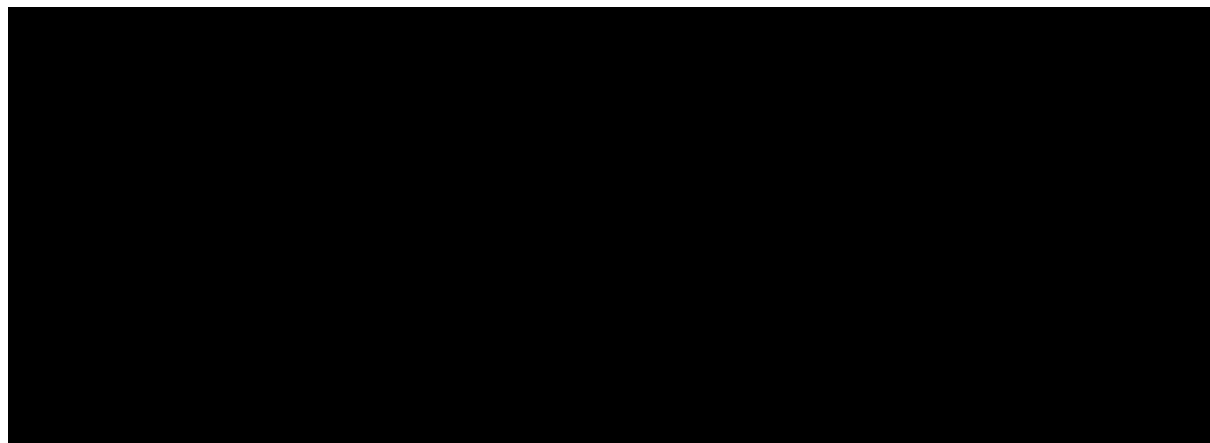
Britain First's posts often used several recurring visual themes in their 'Ban the Burka' campaign. Often, images incorporated elements that were stylised as warning signs, stamps and related symbols to emphasise the call for bans on the practice. The most common of these elements was to include the phrase 'banned' or 'ban it' stylised as a rubber stamp marks (figs. 7.10, 7.15 and 7.21), symbolising restriction by bureaucracy or authority. Similarly, some images also featured road signs, such as the no/prohibition sign (fig. 7.20) and do not enter sign (fig. 7.12). Typically, these elements might be considered negative due to their perception of regulatory inconvenience, but here they are recontextualised as positive. These elements were simple, easy, albeit low quality additions that could be combined with stock images to illustrate a key aspect to BF's viral Islamoprejudiced content.



**(Left to right: figs. 7.12 and 7.13): visual reframing of the niqab.**

Furthermore, Britain First often incorporated dehumanising and infantilising visual metaphors. Again, this was not unique to BF's content, but rather, a widespread and regularly indulged trope within Western society. Referring back to the testimony of veiled Muslim women, participants described derogatory names as a "form of 'entertainment'" for non-Muslims, such as "ninja, Catwoman, Batman, Darth Vader, ghost woman, bin bag, letterbox, postbox, witch and walking coffin" (Zempi, 2018: 69). In figure 7.12, for instance, the person depicted has been dehumanised by equating her likeness to a stop sign, in reference to similar, (literal) objectification of the other denigrating racial epithets described. Figure 7.13 depicts a young woman in a niqab with prison bars photoshopped across her face, obscuring her eyes. This image particularly evokes an implicit call to action by framing the niqab as a source of gender oppression represented by the bars. Visually, the niqab is implicitly compared to a prison, and the female to a prisoner. Again, the woman's eyes represent the focal point of her objectification, as her niqab resembles a prison window through which the audience can see its occupant and note her gender. Though the image intends to frame the creator/sharer as an

informed critic on the issue, the problematic, Orientalist and reductionist representation of the niqab precludes any meaningful debate on the subject. Tariq Amin-Khan notes that “Muslims and others who would wish to question the patriarchal submission underlying the idea of the niqab [...] also feel silenced or defend the right to veil in the face of racist attacks against niqab-wearing women” (2012).



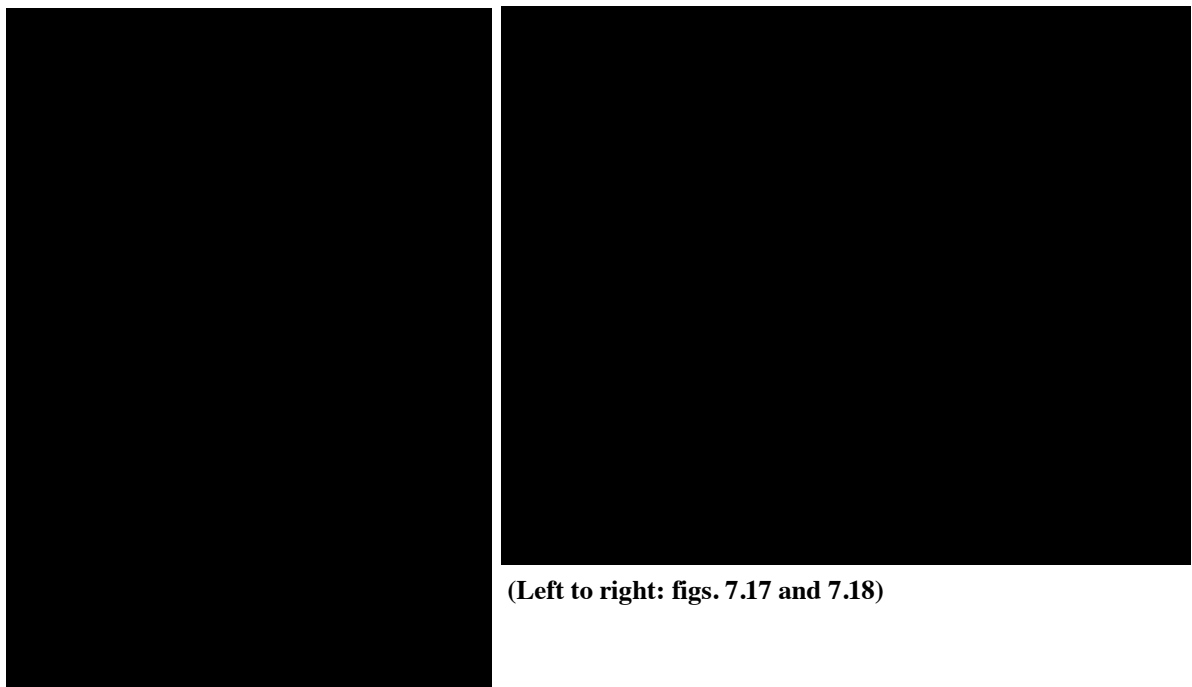
**(Left to right: figs. 7.14, 7.15 and 7.16): the niqab as incompatible with Western**

The niqab was often described as incompatible with Western society. These types of images (figs. 7.14, 7.15 and 7.16) all emphasised the foreignness of the niqab and burka. Figures 7.14 and 7.14 particularly simply state outright that “this should not be seen on British streets” and “it has no place in Western societies”. These statements were reinforced by photographs of niqab-wearing women in public, situating them on streets and in communities that they supposedly have no place in. In figure 7.14, the women featured appear benign, simply walking down the street. In figure 7.15, however, several women have hands raised to their mouths and appear to be shouting, as though acting disruptively. However, partially obscured by the red stencil lettering, one woman appears to be videoing the incident, suggesting that the women are responding to something antagonistic out of frame. The lack of context implicitly frames the image subjects as disruptive, reinforced by the provocative caption that refers to

“[a] threat to all of our security” and “a sign of Islamic conquest and oppression” in a time “of heightened terrorism”. The symbolism of the niqab in these images as a metaphor for the perceived ‘Islamification’ of Britain bear resemblance to BNP campaign leaflets from the 2008 London election, entitled ‘The Changing Face of London’ examined by Richardson and Wodak (2009). The BNP leaflet also featured three women in niqabs walking down a street (with one woman even pushing a pushchair, as in figure 7.14), though the photographed women can be seen instead making an obscene gesture to the camera (and therefore, the audience), reducing the women to an unfriendly, foreign ‘Other’ (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 63-6). In this context, Britain First’s images can also be interpreted as evoking the same sentiment as the BNP literature.

Figure 7.16, on the other hand, features a simple stock image, removing the photo subject from the context of British streets and Western societies. Instead, the message is portrayed by the text, negatively contrasting British inaction to the total bans in France and the Netherlands. This dimension of Britain First’s opposition was also posited in a video of a Christian Patrol through Bury Park. The patrol itself received a lot of attention due to Jayda Fransen’s subsequent conviction for religiously aggravated assault for shouting at a hijab-wearing member of the public, Sumayyah Sharpe (Press Association, 2016). In a video posted to Facebook and YouTube to publicise their patrol, part of the argument between Fransen and Sharpe was included. The incident involved Fransen, holding a large Christian cross and wearing Britain First merchandise, stating outright that “you’re being hidden because your men can’t control their urges” and “this is a Christian country” (Jayda Fransen, 2016). At other points in the video, Paul Golding and Fransen also claimed in the video that the British people that were left in the town were “a minority” and shouted at bystanders that “this isn’t your town, this is our country, our town” (Jayda Fransen, 2016).

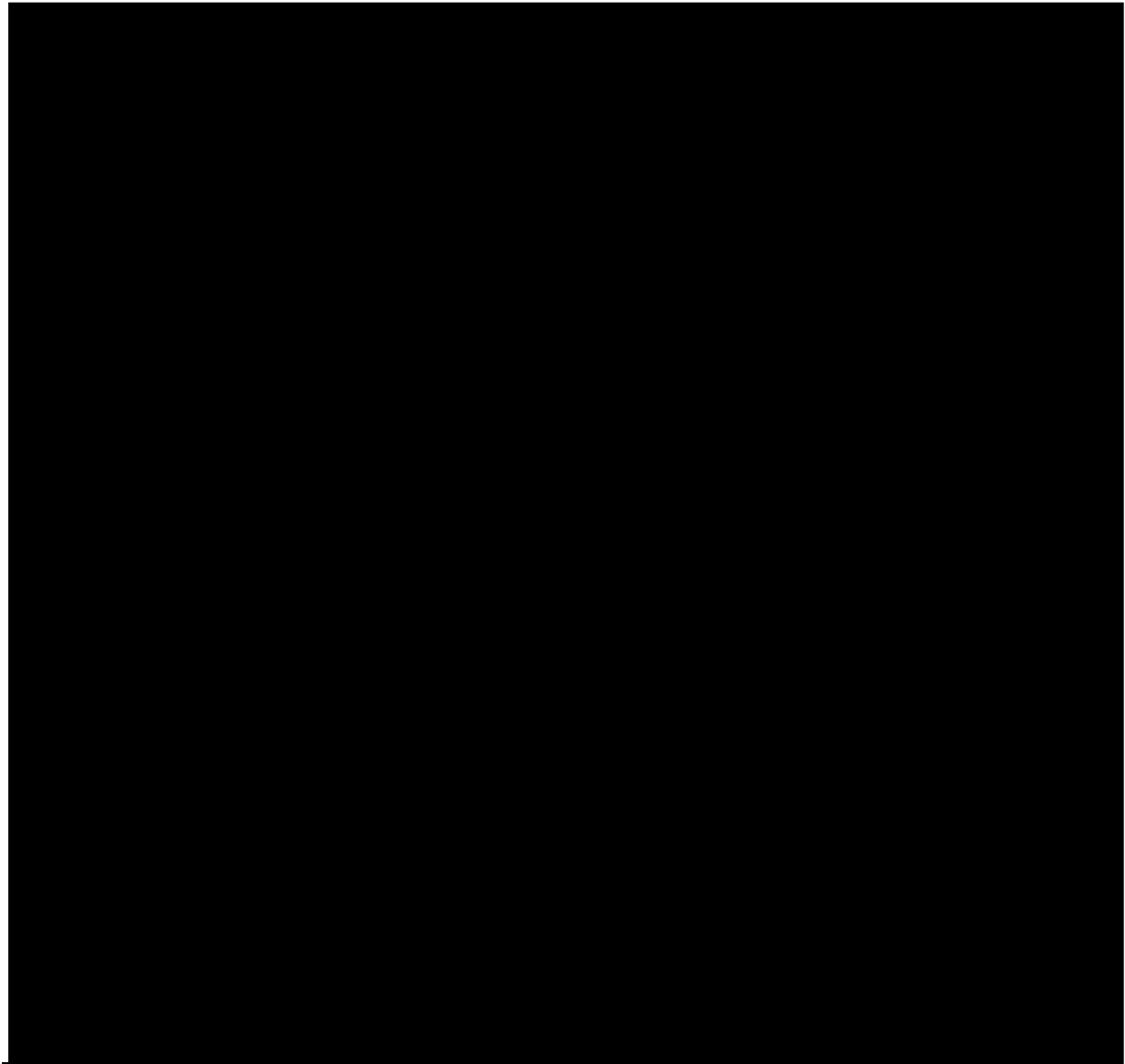
Linked to the cultural dimension of Britain First’s campaign against the hijab, the group often used images to portray the burka and niqab to inferiorise (perceived) culture in predominantly Muslim countries. As Tahir Abbas observes, “British popular discourse has shifted from seeing minorities as homogenous entities to discerning differences within and between ‘Blacks’ and Asians; then, within South Asians, to differences among Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis; and finally, among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs” (2004: 27). However, religion (and particularly Islam) remains a homogenous entity within Western media and popular discourse, emblematic of a refusal to modernise and integrate, and as such, the burka has become a homogenising symbol of Islam within it (Saeed, 2007; Khiabany and Williamson, 2008: 70).



(Left to right: figs. 7.17 and 7.18)

Typically, the group attempted to use humour to delegitimise the burka. Figures 7.17 and 7.18 demonstrate how this was operationalised within Britain First content. The second image in particular presents eight stereotyped or exaggerated examples of traditional dress across Europe and contrasts these with eight images of women wearing either the burka or niqab. The accompanying text reads “diversity: apparently we don’t have it, and these guys

do” as a sardonic endorsement of multiculturalism. Leaving aside the validity of reducing culture and diversity to clothing, even examining the image by its own logic demonstrates how these tropes manifest. In Egypt, for instance, the veil has been banned in some universities and hospitals, and there has been some debate over whether to ban the burka and niqab in public entirely (Ibrahim, 2010; Smith, 2016). Similarly, some universities in Syria have also banned



(Left to right, top to bottom: figs. 7.19, 7.20, 7.21 and 7.22)

face veils (BBC News, 2010). Finally, in Pakistan (and South Asia in general), the dupatta is worn more often than the niqab (Orakzai, 2011).

Finally, Britain First's opposition to the niqab and burka also attempted to draw upon the British public's security concerns. Specifically, these types of posts often collocated images of the niqab with text that emphasised the threat of Islamic extremism, implying that the niqab could be used to facilitate terrorist attacks in the UK. Following the escape of terror suspect Mohammed Ahmed Mohamed from a mosque in Acton, Conservative MPs Sir Gerald Howarth and Phillip Hollobone both called on then-Home Secretary Theresa May in the House of Commons to ban the burka for security reasons, which was opposed by May and other Conservatives at the time (Rees-Mogg, 2013). This prompted BF to post in support of Howarth, then later about the incident in a blog post, and launched a 'Ban the Burka' petition on the same day, which they shared 81 times in the subsequent six months. Several news stories and images were shared in the following years aimed to support this concern, such as one story published in the *Daily Mail* that occurred in Watford with a "[b]urka-clad white man" (Mullin, 2015) and another published in the *Express* featuring an ISIS defector in Sinai (Batchelor, 2016). In 2016, the group also shared five news stories that featured calls from Alternative für Deutschland politicians to ban the burka in Germany and the subsequent proposals for a partial ban by Chancellor Angela Merkel and Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere.

Several images depicted below (figs. 7.19, 7.20, 7.21 and 7.22) all explicitly play to this trope. Each image features a photo depicting a woman or women wearing niqabs. However, the choice of photo for each image is intended to create deliberate ambiguity for the audience. In two of the photos (figs. 7.20 and 7.21), the women are far enough away, or the camera is otherwise set, so that each woman's eyes are also obscured. Another photo (fig. 7.22) meanwhile depicts a woman wearing a niqab in extreme close-up. From the pixilation of the image, it appears that it has been enlarged significantly, though the left-hand side of her face has been darkened significantly as though obscured by shadow. Furthermore, each photo is

overlaid with text that invites the audience to ponder the identity of the women depicted with rhetorical questions and assertions such as “[w]ho is behind that mask” and “it could be anyone”. The text in figure 7.21 grounds this trope with a visual metaphor by rhetorically asking the audience “how’s this for a police parade?”. By contrast, the image shown in figure 7.19 takes a different tack. Unique amongst the images presented, the backing photograph did not depict a woman in a niqab or burka. Instead, the photo depicts a group of motorcyclists in protest against the Liversedge Co-op Texaco petrol station policy that requires customers remove crash helmets before using the pumps (Wood, 2014). This image attempts to frame the ban as a practical and logical step, stating outright that “for security reasons there is no difference” to obfuscate the obvious distinction between easily-removable personal safety equipment and cultural garments.

#### **- Rotherham campaign**

As well as the symbols described above, Britain First often focused on events as concept structures for the content they produced. Often these events simply evidenced or reaffirmed ideological positions. Images and videos often evoked terrorist incidents, for instance, such as 7/7 London suicide bombings and the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby, to ground Islamoprejudiced, culturally prejudiced and anti-immigrant utterances. The image below (fig. 7.23) is one example of how BF used photos recognisably associated with these events to evoke anti-Muslim sentiment, combined with the phrase “enough is enough” (implying that these events might be endless without action), to create a space for a call to action to convert their Facebook audience into paying members.

Rotherham appears to have held particular symbolic importance for Britain First as a microcosm for the issues that dominated their political agenda. As early as March 2014, the



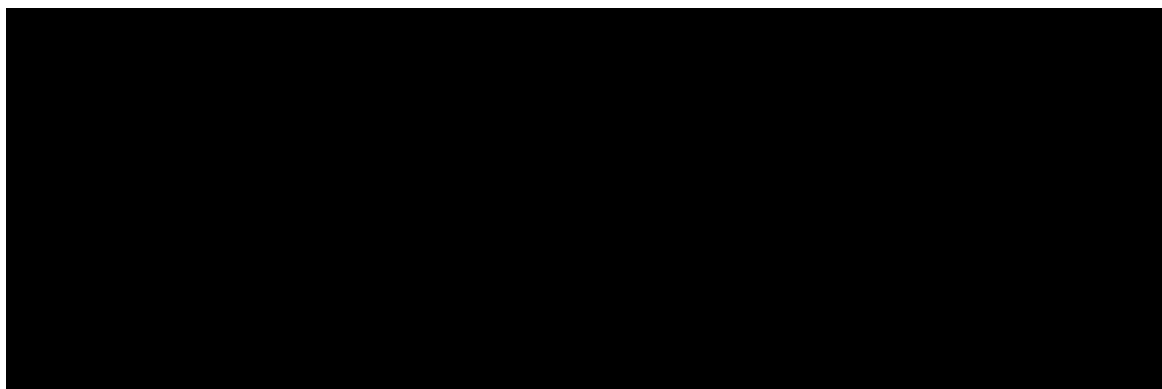
group launched a complaint campaign, posting over a dozen times, following allegations that schools in the town had banned pork (dubbed the ‘bacon ban’) and replaced all meat with halal. It was following revelations that more than 1,500 victims had been groomed in the town and had been ignored by authorities (Dearden, 2018; Hill, 2018), however, that the group began to organise numerous direct-action campaigns over several years. This included storming local mosques, invading council premises, leafletting, holding public demonstrations and confronting non-white taxi drivers. Finally, in late 2016, BF shifted focus to Telford, which they dubbed the ‘New Rotherham’ in wake of “the scale of the Muslim grooming gang horrors that have unfolded in the town”, organising days of protest in and around Birmingham.



The majority of direct-action events, such as the confrontations with the local council, mosques and taxi drivers, were led by Britain First activists. These events were recorded and formed the basis of promotional content and propaganda that were shared across several platforms, including Facebook and YouTube. However, for the march through the town, scheduled for September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, BF aimed to mobilise as many of the public as possible. In

total, 17 percent of all event posts that BF shared, or 80 out of 450, aimed to publicise the march. Beyond these event posts, BF also used other promotional techniques, such as distributing leaflets and publishing material to the website and social media.

Three of these images (figs. 7.24, 7.25 and 7.26) are examples of the posters Britain First disseminated in the lead-up to the event. All three images were printed, displayed on the website, used as Facebook posts, cover photos and on the Facebook event, and as stingers for both related and unrelated propaganda videos. Though all three images depict very different aspects of the Rotherham scandal, the dual symbolism of darkness and lightness was present in all three. The first poster (fig 7.24) features the photos of five perpetrators of child sex abuse in the town previously convicted in 2010 (BBC, 2015a) imposed over a dark background. Each photo has been cropped and enlarged to remove the white wall behind each person and show as much of the face as possible, likely to emphasise the ethnicity of each. Unique to this poster, the darkness of the background and removal of the white walls in each photograph instead accentuates the words ‘Rotherham Day of Action’, which were also the largest and most prominent title relative to the other two posters. In this way, poster focused on the title itself, supported by the images.



**(Figs. 7.24, 7.25 and 7.26): Rotherham direct action posters**

The focus on the convicted men follows another image that was shared over seven months prior (fig. 7.27). This image featured 45 photographs (a mixture of police mugshots and press photos) arranged in a grid. The text asks the audience “[w]hat have they all got in common?” This question encourages the audience to



(Fig. 7.27)

ponder the racial and religious identity of these men, with a clue provided by the emphasis on their abuse of English girls in particular. By doing this, the image suggests that enacting such abuse is inherently linked to Muslim men or men of colour, ‘evidenced’ by the photos. The similarity between this image and the Rotherham poster implies that the latter attempts to encourage the audience to draw the same conclusions with a similarly constructed image.

The second poster, on the other hand, focuses on inaction by the local authorities. The setting and body language of the subject in particular reinforce this by implying vulnerability and isolation. In the image, a young, blonde, white girl sits slumped in a corner, her face hidden by her hair and her head held despairingly in one hand. The brickwork around her suggests she is outside, perhaps in an alley having escaped her plight, or perhaps in a garage or basement, hidden or trapped. The light in the image comes from a spotlight above, accentuating the bloneness of the girl’s hair whilst also symbolising how the metaphorical spotlight is now on the victims and how the crimes they have faced have similarly ‘come to light’. Meanwhile, despite the illuminating spotlight, the darkness still surrounds the girl on either side, suggesting that the threat still remains. The accompanying tagline simply states, “fight Muslim grooming!”, explicitly contextualising the girl’s plight. The image text explains the story in more detail, evoking the ‘rule of three’ to add dramatic weight: “the police ignored them/the council ignored them/social services ignored them”; the poster then shifts to the call to action, asking the audience “will you ignore them?” and urging them to attend.

The third poster was arguably the most evocative of all the posters shared. Again, the authorities' inaction is referenced, but instead the headline is changed to the less controversial "if you care, be there". The image, however, features a close up of a young girl, eyes wide in fear. Covering her mouth are two large, disembodied male hands, preventing her from calling out. Again, the dichotomy between light and dark can be observed. Most obviously, the brightly-lit face of the girl is contrasted to the darkness of the background, as the hands attempt to drag her back into the shadows. More subtly, the face of the girl is contrasted with the hands themselves. Whilst the girl's face is clean, albeit with slight shadowing under the eyes to accentuate her fearful expression and perhaps to suggest violence that has been inflicted upon her, the hands are darkened and covered in dirt and filth, intensifying the violation and indecency of smothering the girl's mouth to evoke a visceral reaction from the audience. Indeed, the poster here indulges in the trope that the citizen/foreigner binary can be ascribed by cleanliness/uncleanliness, a recurring motif within anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 55).



(Fig. 7.28)

Several other symbols and motifs also provided continuity between the three images. These elements tied the three posters together into a coherent promotional campaign. First, the three posters were linked by the form of the text. Each poster featured the same stylised 'Rotherham Day of Action' headline and details for the day in the bottom-left corner. Moreover, the text on all three posters featured the same simple, evocative red and white colour palette, bold, blocky typefaces and capitalised lettering.

The vivid red and capitalised lettering in particular clearly evoke anger, urgency and danger to reinforce the tone of each poster, whilst the rough texture of the title letters evoke to action film posters and imply a warlike setting. Moreover, the typeface itself meaningfully evokes the

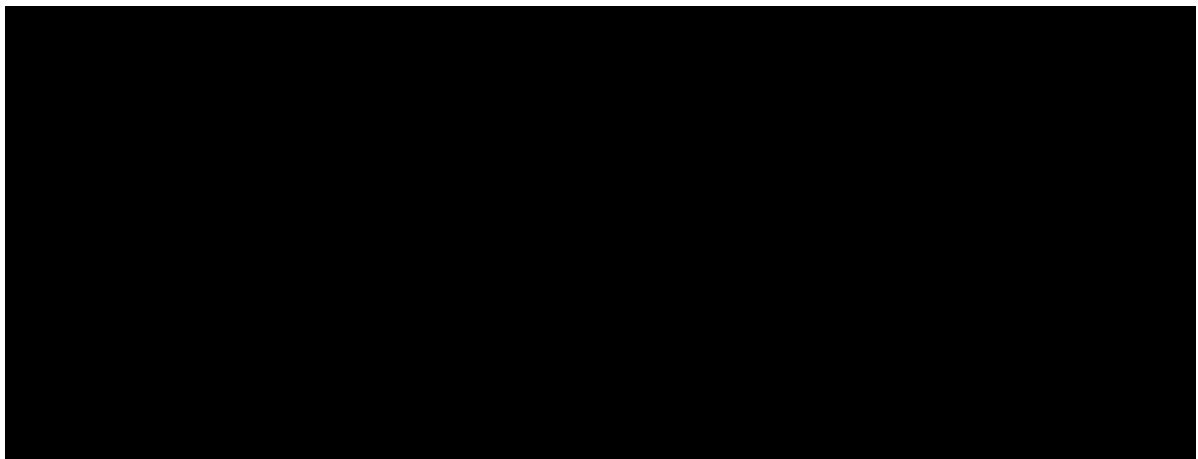
stylisation and branding of films such as the Schwarzenegger sci-fi action/horror franchise *Predator* (fig. 7.28).

Second, each poster incorporated Britain First branding. In each, the BF logo has been placed in the bottom right hand corner. The logo itself follows in the tradition of far-right parties such as the BNP and National Front by incorporating the Union flag (Engström, 2014: 7) and British symbols such as a gold lion, crown and laurel wreath. The ‘C’ in ‘Action’ on each poster has also been replaced with a stylised red lion adapted from the logo itself, reinforcing the association between BF and taking action (framed against the inaction of the local council and police). Finally, each poster incorporated a town welcome sign element to the bottom right of each poster’s main image. The element featured the words “Welcome to Rotherham” in the traditional British road sign font and format, followed by the subtitle “the Islamic paedophile capital of Britain” in a stereotyped Arabian typeface underneath. The inclusion of the sign perhaps symbolises the concept of a quaint, generic British town, undermined by invasive, foreign influences represented by the typeface beneath. Whilst the images in each poster were all distinct from one other, the addition of the sign motif literally spells out the recurring underlying theme to the reader regardless of the primary message of the poster itself.

### **- London’s Last Stand campaign**

Based on the amount of time spent, number of direct-action campaigns undertaken, and proportion of content published, the 2016 London mayoral election was the most significant electoral campaign that Britain First ran. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, eventual winner Sadiq Khan was announced as the Labour candidate. On the same day, BF released a short, two-minute video of Khan that began with the introduction “how Labour’s candidate greets Londoners” followed

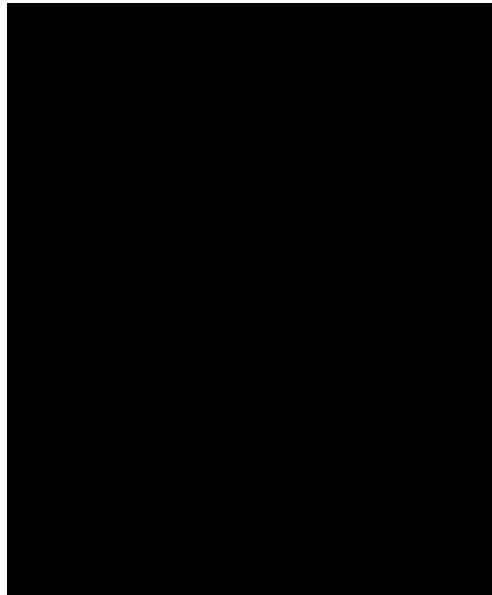
by scenes from Khan's nomination video (fig. 7.29) that began with him saying "as-salamu alaykum", a traditional religious salutation among Muslims (though the salutation and similar other salutations have been used more broadly in several languages) (Britain First, 2016a). The video was posted on Facebook several times, along with the caption "Keep London British". On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the group posted an image of Khan, saying "LABOUR'S CANDIDATE FOR MAYOR OF LONDON, SADIQ KHAN, WITH FELLOW MUSLIMS IN LONDON! LONDON IS A BRITISH CITY AND WE WANT IT BACK!". On November 25<sup>th</sup>, they group launched their official campaign for the London mayoral and general assembly elections the following May, along with their slogan, 'London's Last Stand'.



**(Fig. 7.29): Sadiq Khan candidate video**

Throughout the campaign, the group also published several more videos that sought to portray Khan as having links to extremism or that were critical of Islam more broadly. One video, narrated by Golding, emphasised Khan's "collaboration and involvement with Islamists, hate preachers, terrorist godfathers, sexists, homophobes and downright extremists" (Britain First, 2016d). The group even released a video called "Britain First komunikat wybory do polskich patriotów" ('Britain First election message to Polish patriots') that aimed to target the London Polish vote and mobilise Polish nostalgic nationalism. The video was subtitled in

Polish, in which Jayda Fransen described Islam as a “barbaric ideology” and referred to the “Polish army that saved Europe at the gates of Vienna”, and featured two ‘vox pops’ with supporters of Polish heritage who each claimed to support BF “100 percent” (Britain First, 2016d).



(Fig. 7.30)

In the lead up to the vote, one anti-Khan image in particular stood out. The image depicted Khan supporting the ‘Refugees Welcome’ movement to pressure the Government to accept more refugees in wake of the death of the young Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi, who drowned on a beach in Turkey (Dathan and Saul, 2015). Khan’s picture formed the basis of the BF image, to which the distinctive white Impact typeface and a red sign saying ‘#StopIslam’ was added and was posted with the caption “[a] danger to London!”. By adding the hashtag, the image deliberately conflated Islam as inherently linked to the refugee crisis, playing on tropes casting refugees as a national security threat. The caption itself is interesting for its ambiguity, given that it could conceivably be referring to Khan himself, Islam more broadly, or the refugee crisis itself.

Despite the modern context for the image, the message itself took inspiration from a much older piece of content. The statement itself, “if you want a jihadi for a neighbour vote Sadiq Khan Labour”, references several controversial, racialised campaigns from the 1960s that culminated in Enoch Powell’s infamous Rivers of Blood speech that marked a low point for racial equality in post-war Britain. The use of this refrain therefore clearly situates the image within this historical context as well as the contemporary political context of the campaign and refugee crisis itself. Indeed, the image should be considered against the further backdrop of the controversial Conservative campaign that sought to portray Khan as a “closet extremist” (Mason, 2016). Notably, Goldsmith was criticised for attempting to divide communities by disseminating materials targeting Hindus suggesting that Khan would tax their jewellery and for questioning Khan’s judgement in “associating with alleged extremists” (Mason, 2016). In particular, Prime Minister David Cameron attempted to link him to a man who was described as having supported Islamic State<sup>19</sup> (Mason, 2016; Mason, Stewart and Asthana, 2016). Some corners of the media gave space to propagate this agenda, with Goldsmith writing for the *Mail* (described as a “passionate plea”) with the headline “[o]n Thursday, are we really going to hand the world's greatest city to a Labour party that thinks terrorists is its friends?” (2016). The campaign itself was criticised by prominent Conservatives such as Mohammed Amin, chair of the Conservative Muslim Forum, and Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, former Conservative co-chair, as well as conservative journalists such as Peter Osborne. Against this backdrop, Britain First was able to run their own Islamoprejudiced campaign targeting those potentially dog-whistled by Goldsmith’s own campaign.

The most well-known instance of the phrase referenced by the image occurred in Smethwick, West Midlands, in the 1964 general election, and has been referenced extensively

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<sup>19</sup> This later backfired when it emerged that the man in question, Suliman Gani, was revealed to be a Conservative supporter and that he supported the idea of *an* Islamic state, not the terrorist group (Mason, 2016; Syal, 2016).



as a significant incident in negative race relations and anti-immigrant sentiment. Despite a nationwide swing to Labour, who won the election by five seats, Conservative Peter Griffiths managed to unseat the sitting Labour MP and Shadow Foreign Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker. Griffiths did so by mobilising latent racist sentiments against immigrants amongst working class communities as an outlet for anxieties over factory closures and housing shortages (Jeffries, 2014). The race-baiting campaign was emblematised by the slogan “if you want a n\*\*\*\*r for your neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour” (Bleich, 2002: 1066; Hansen, 2003: 29). Walker himself was jeered by Conservative supporters after conceding defeat, who yelled “[w]here are your n\*\*\*\*\*s now, Walker?” and “[t]ake your n\*\*\*\*\*s away!” (Hansen, 2003: 29; Jeffries, 2014). Griffiths, for his part, did not endorse the slogan officially, but he also explicitly refused to condemn it, telling *The Times* that “I would not condemn any man who said that,” and “I regard it as a manifestation of popular feeling” (Jeffries, 2014). The slogan manifested again in Clapham in 1970, this time in an unofficial campaign against the Grenada-born Labour candidate Dr David Pitt (later Baron Pitt of Hampstead). Nicholas Deakin and Jenny Bourne argue that the circulation of a leaflet in the constituency, which read “if you want a coloured for a neighbour vote Labour; if you’re already burdoned [*sic*] vote Tory”, likely contributed to the low turnout and 11-point swing against him (1970: 411; see also Pitt, 2017).

Britain First’s response to the election of Khan also garnered significant attention on both traditional and social media. On election night, whilst Sadiq Khan was giving his victory speech, Paul Golding turned his back on Khan in protest. The move was widely mocked on Twitter especially, with some referring to him as a “bigot”, “racist” and “pathetic” whilst others joked that he was playing “hide and Sadiq” or had embraced Islam and was “facing Mecca for evening prayer” (McKernan, 2016; Polden, 2016; Waterson, 2016a). In an email to supporters, Jayda Fransen wrote that “[s]howing your back is an age-old form of polite protest and the Left is particularly fond of this tactic”. Paul Golding himself later told *Buzzfeed* that “I didn’t turn

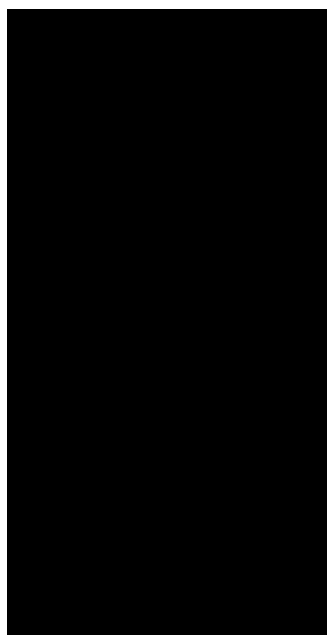
my back around because he's Asian, I turned my back on him because he's a vile man” (Hickson, 2016; McKernan, 2016). Golding’s protest marked the beginning of a campaign to delegitimise Khan’s mayorship, despite attaining the highest personal mandate of any UK politician in history (Polden, 2016). In a press release, Golding asserted that “Britain First now considers all Muslim elected officials as ‘occupiers’ and will start to oppose their strategy of entryism and take-over of our political system” (Blair, 2016). An equivalent Facebook post was much more direct, stating simply “ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS NOT WELCOME” (fig. 7.31). The group uncritically shared the majority of media coverage of their protest, simply captioning it as “more publicity”.



(Fig. 7.31)

The anti-Khan campaign would continue for at least the rest of the year. Several posts simply encouraged users to like and share if they opposed Khan’s mayorship (fig. 7.32). Indeed, social media provided a particular advantage for BF’s campaign as it allowed Fransen and Golding to continue to campaign against Khan long after mainstream public interest in the

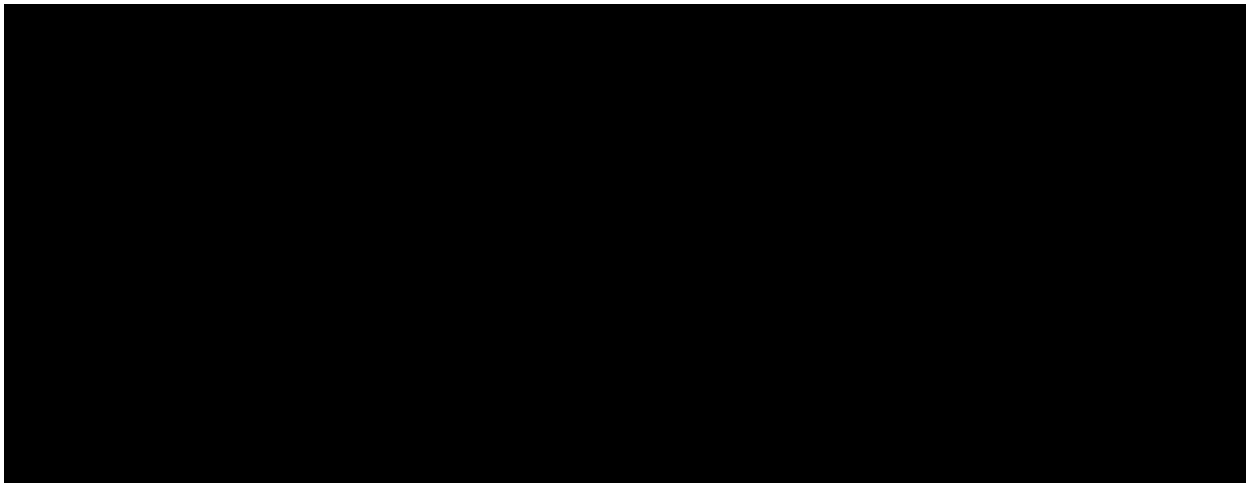
election died away. Though BF threatened to take offline, direct action against prominent Muslim politicians “such as Sadiq Khan (mayor of London), Sajid Javid (cabinet minister), MOHAMMED Altaf-Khan (mayor of Oxford), Hussain Akhtar (mayor of Blackburn) ... and so on”, in reality this did not materialise. Indeed, until the end of 2016, though Britain First did launch several direct-action campaigns against mosques and ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ in London and in and near Birmingham, none of these were directly opposed to the aforementioned figures. Strangely, their list also included “Shafique Shah (mayor of Birmingham)”, despite the fact that Shah had been Mayor from 2014 to 2015 and that the Lord Mayor at the time was Ray Hassall (York, 2016). In terms of street campaigns and finances, the group shifted focus towards their EU referendum campaign and ongoing legal issues. Instead, the group continued to campaign through sharing content on social media.



(Fig. 7.32)

The majority of posts published for the campaign demonstrated two key dimensions, both continuing themes that were present before May 2016. First, many posts following the election vilified Khan personally and questioned the validity of his election as Mayor by emphasising or referencing his Muslim identity. Three related images demonstrate how Britain First sought to delegitimise Khan (figs. 7.33, 7.34 and 7.35). Each image was accompanied by

the caption “London has fallen”, referencing the tagline ‘London’s Last Stand’ that was used prior to the election as well as a schlock action movie that was released around the same time. The caption, therefore, does not so much articulate an existential threat to London inasmuch as London was already doomed from existence. All three images feature photos of Khan that, out of context, would appear innocuous: Khan surrounded by people; Khan standing with Parliament in the background, referencing his prior career as an MP; and Khan making a speech on the campaign trail. A BF website watermark is positioned in the bottom right of each image, simultaneously crediting the image to BF and acting as a call to action for viewers to visit the group’s website.



(Figs. 7.33, 7.34 and 7.35)

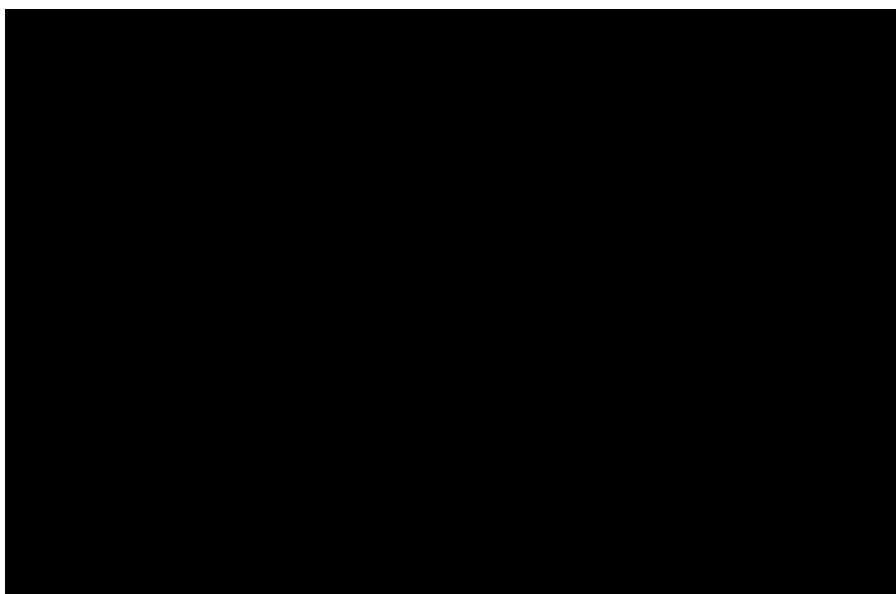
Instead, the real message of each image is conveyed by accompanying text. The first image (fig. 7.33) equates the number of people who voted for Khan with the number of Muslims in London. Thus, Britain First attempted to portray Khan as elected solely by Muslim people, implying that he did not similarly represent non-Muslims. However, the source of the “official figures” is left ambiguous and the 1.3 million figure itself is questionable. Whilst the 2011 census snapshot published by the GLA did establish that the number of people who gave their faith as Islam exceeded one million, this obviously included under-18s who would not be eligible to vote in the election. Whilst the second image (fig. 7.34) also played on this theme,

it instead portrayed Khan in opposition to white Londoners. Again, the caption should be assessed critically. During a speech in Brixton, Khan did highlight the fact that 13 of the 16 board members for Transport for London were white men and pledged to reshape the board to include women and ethnic minorities “to better reflect London's diversity in the interest of Londoners” (Bienkov, 2016). The image, however, removed the context of there being no people of colour represented on the board in the first place (Hill, 2016) and that Khan also referred to the lack of female representation. The third image (fig. 7.35), meanwhile, referred to an interview given to Iran’s Press TV in 2009 to cast Khan in opposition to ‘moderate Muslims’. The statement made by the image was technically true, as Khan stated that “you can't just pick and choose who you speak to, you can't just speak to Uncle Toms” (Mortimer, 2016), but it should be noted that in context the phrase can be seen as racially insensitive but clearly not extremist, and Khan issued an apology when footage emerged (Tapsfield, 2016). Both the second and third image used similar punchlines (“[g]ets elected mayor of London”) that attempted to reinforce the perceived absurdity of Khan’s actions described the setup. Notably, these punchlines were presented in the third person singular indicative present tense without pronouns, reflecting an established a typical image macro meme convention.

Second, many posts focused on the supposed threats to or effects on London itself. Several posts used alarmist imagery depict eschatological implications of Khan’s mayorship. Others attempted to depict perceived or imagined cultural changes to London due to immigration. These images were also combined with the ‘London has fallen’ slogan. Typically, these posts incorporated themes of nostalgic British nationalism and reframed these as contrasted against Islamoprejudiced imagery.

The threat to or destruction of London as a symbol within the context of the ‘London has fallen’ campaign revisited content that Britain First had published prior. One image from August 2015 (fig. 7.36) provided perhaps the most cogent inspiration for the content produced

after the mayoral election. The image makes use of the iconic *St. Paul's Survives* image, taken in 1940. The photograph itself depicts the intact dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, surrounded by thick smoke and blackened, bombed-out buildings. Tom Allbeson describes the iconic status of both the photograph and its subject as an important British symbol both before and after the Second World War (2015). First, as a cathedral, it symbolised the threat of “godless vandals” against Christianity. Second, the dominance of the dome against London's skyline symbolised Britain's geopolitical, political dominance in the world at the time. Finally, the origins of the cathedral after the destruction of its predecessor of the same name evoked the imagery of a phoenix rising from the ashes of a destroyed London. Each dimension of the symbol of St. Paul's have been similarly present in BF's content, particularly the Christian/non-Christian dichotomy and British cultural hegemony. Similarly, regarding the photograph, Allbeson notes that by “[c]ombining a depiction of the dome (an architectural icon) with images of the burned-out facades of vernacular buildings (which might be homes or places of work), the photograph ... [occupies] a central position in the visualization of wartime destruction in the 1940s, postwar reconstruction into the 1950s, and subsequent representations and valuations of both” (2015). The ambiguity of the photograph meant that it was circulated by German and British media alike, leading to its eventual use as a part of BF's social media strategy.



(Fig. 7.36)

This historic context is repurposed and reframed by the textual overlay to modernise the themes associated with *St. Paul's Survives*. The text reads, “English London overcame the plague, survived the Great Fire and withstood the Blitz; murdered by immigration”. Again, the image makes use of the natural heavenly lightness of the Christian dome and the dark of the destroyed buildings to reinforce the contrast between “English London” and “immigration”, which are also emphasised by the visual hierarchy of those words relative to the others. Moreover, in invoking the bubonic plague, Great Fire and the Blitz as seminal, ‘darkest hour’ moments in the history of London, the text reinforces the association of immigration with existential crisis. The image itself, and particularly the typeface, is stylised as a Second World War propaganda poster, further reinforcing the theme of ‘Britain’s darkest hour’ through the choice of typeface and arrangement of the text. However, whilst referencing the darkness of these events, these are also framed as acts of resilience and defiance. London is described as ‘overcoming’, ‘surviving’ and ‘withstanding’ these threats in spite of their significance. However, in the case of immigration, London is described as “murdered”, removing any association with ‘fighting back’ so often deployed in other Britain First propaganda. The choice of the word “murdered” is particularly significant, as it not only humanises and personifies the city but also implies a ‘*mens rea*’ in the perceived downfall of London whereas other, similar words (such as ‘destroyed’) might imply negligence.

Iconic London landmarks also featured in several videos in the lead up to the election as symbolic of the threat posed to London itself. As seen in figure 7.29, an image of St. Paul’s featured in the “how Labour’s candidate greets Londoners” video, with the Islamic crescent atop the dome in place of the Christian cross as a metaphor for the ‘Islamification’ of London (Britain First, 2016a). Similarly, Britain First’s official TV advert featured Golding and

Fransen talking to camera in front of monuments such as the Cenotaph along Whitehall and the Victoria Tower at the Houses of Parliament from Milbank (Britain First, 2016b).

The day after the election, the group published a photoshopped image of the *Evening Standard* featuring the headline “London has fallen” (fig. 7.37). This image was shared by many, including the *Have I Got News For You* Twitter page, lampooning the media and Conservative Party campaign against Khan (Have I Got News for You, 2016). The background image, taken from a poster for the *Olympus Has Fallen* sequel, *London Has Fallen*, with the movie title and lead actors cropped out, depicts Westminster, emblematised by the Elizabeth Tower in the middle distance, surrounded by raging fires and myriad plumes of smoke across the city. In the banner at the top of the paper, a photo of Khan stares down at the camera lens, next to the caption “Sadiq Khan: just how much of a Muslim terrorist is he?” As with the ‘murdered by immigration’ image, the smoke demonstrates the tangible threat and impact of war on the cityscape, though in the film poster-derived ‘London has fallen’ image, the scene is much more vivid, visceral and excessive. The image shared some thematic similarities with another image posted almost two weeks later (fig. 7.41). Again, the image depicts Westminster, clearly signposted by the prominent Elizabeth Tower. Instead of smoke and fire, however, the danger is symbolic, depicted by the three threatening figures superimposed over the image. Though partially obscured by the middle and leftmost figures, the Black Standard can be seen, identifying these figures as Islamic State militants. Similarly, the text of the image explicitly describes the threat demonstrated by the picture as posed by Islamic terrorism. Here, the text states: “Islamophobia is Islamorealism. Terror is coming to our streets!” The words “is” and “our” in particular are emphasised through visual hierarchy, attesting to the reality of the articulated threat and that the threat is to ‘us’. Moreover, the text seems to pre-empt the counter-argument that the image itself is Islamophobic by reframing the ‘phobia’ and ‘realism’.





Figures 7.38 and 7.40, however, take a less alarmist approach, but nonetheless attempt to demonstrate the ‘threat’ that London faces. However, rather than depicting London as under physical threat (in the sense of threat from war, terrorism, and so on), these images articulated the threat as cultural. In figure 7.38, the image combines two photographs to make this point. The top photograph features a cemetery, with the regular, white headstones and beds of poppy flowers telling the audience that this is a grave for soldiers who died in the First and Second World Wars. The bottom photograph shows a crowd of Muslim people on their knees in prayer in the middle of a road, whilst two police officers in high-vis jackets look on. The image juxtaposes the rows of tombstones with the rows of worshippers by asking the audience “they died... ...for this?” In so doing, the image attempts to mobilise the nationalistic sentiment evoked by images of Remembrance and place them in opposition to the worshippers in the

photograph below, thereby equating them to the forms of European Nazism and fascism that images of Remembrance are typically contrasted against. Figure 7.40, meanwhile, depicts a clichéd illustration of an ‘Islamic’ city; indeed, the image perhaps emulates the stereotype of Agrabah from Disney’s *Aladdin* than any modern city from Muslim-majority countries. The audience’s expectations are subverted, however, with the caption in white Impact typeface that labels the city as “London 2050”. In this image, a similar contrast is implicitly at work, and the audience is encouraged to compare the image that they currently associate with London with the ‘London’ presented in the illustration.

## Concluding remarks

As Engström notes, “[t]he far right’s use of images is an underprioritized area in discourse analysis” (2014). The aim of this chapter has been to discuss how Britain First have used social media in terms of form and purpose. BF often use or replicate the aesthetic of memes to optimise content for a social media audience. Similarly, content frequently juxtaposed elements of lightness and darkness as markers of in- and out-groups and as an expression of ideological perspectives. These elements were used both in standalone posts and in long-term activism, as demonstrated in their ‘Ban the Burka’, ‘Rotherham Day of Action’ and ‘London’s Last Stand’ campaigns. The next chapter shall finally examine UKIP’s content, before turning to the thesis conclusion.

## **Chapter 8**

### **UKIP Qualitative Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

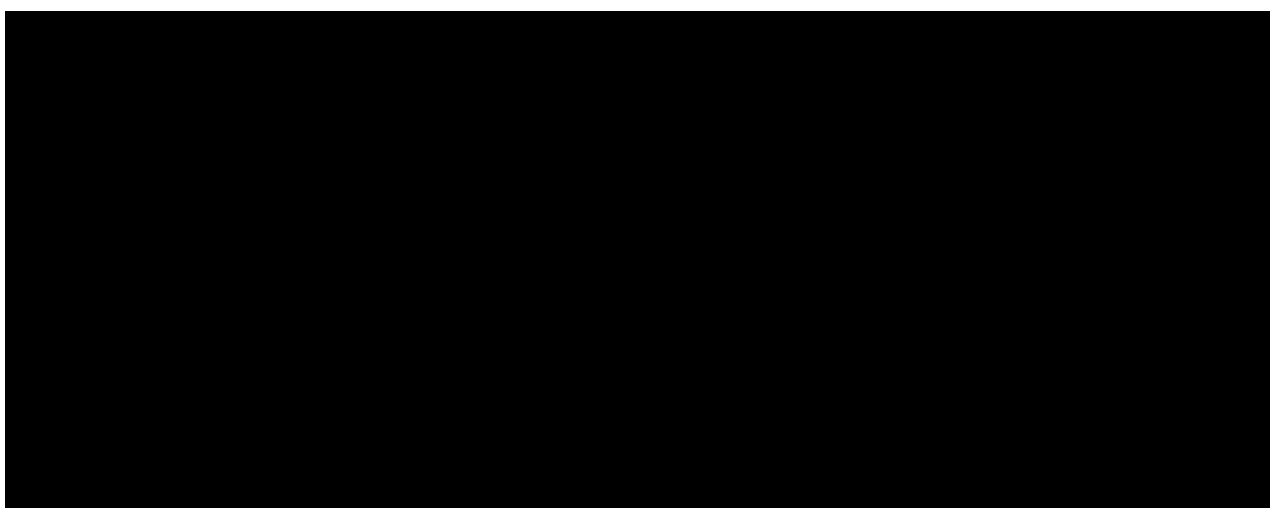
This chapter shall shift focus to UKIP. First, this chapter shall examine content form. UKIP's use of billboards will be explored, as well as how the party used data visualisation to create social media content. Whereas BF used internet memes or meme characteristics to communicate ideology, UKIP instead preferred professional, designed output, often recycled from other mediums, such as billboards or posters. Second, it shall discuss recurring symbolic motifs that appeared throughout the corpus. In the same vein as other radical right propaganda, UKIP made use of flags to symbolise in- and out-groups and contrast togetherness/otherness. Particular attention shall be paid to contrasting contexts in which the UK and EU flags were used. Finally, this chapter shall discuss notable examples of anti-immigration and anti-establishment content.

#### **Use of billboards**

Overall, UKIP's ambition to become a significant political force rested on expanding the party's agenda beyond Euroscepticism (Goodwin and Ford, 2013). As part of this effort, the party were invested in expanding their mainstream and social media coverage, but Farage's 'three M's' of media, messaging and money (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) also involved other traditional forms of campaigning, including using billboard adverts. As Lina Klymenko notes in her analysis of the language of manifestos and billboards, billboard ads and political posters

are “indicative of political party development ... [and] are still an influential mode of political advertising today” (2017: 442). In financial terms, billboards and posters provide an outlet for parties unable to afford pricier television ads or otherwise may not receive large amounts of airtime, even as social media currently provides another, cheaper, more direct alternative to billboards and posters. Given the relative monetary expense of billboards, it follows then that parties would seek to maximise value for money by reposting designs to social media in the same way that both UKIP and Britain First consistently uploaded television appearances and televised electoral campaign spots to Facebook and YouTube.

Early on, UKIP used photographs of billboards as social media posts rather than simply posting the billboards themselves. In each image, the billboard’s message can be clearly observed and is unobscured by images in the foreground. Generally, these messages were plainly stated, unaccompanied by dynamic visual elements or wordplay. Moreover, all billboards used a purple and white colour scheme and consistent typeface to create coherent visual branding.



(Left to right: figs. 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3)

However, it is important to also consider the composition of these images as photographs, rather than simply as billboards themselves. Presenting these images as

photographs is an example of ‘transtextuality’, which is defined by Gerard Genette as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1992: 83; see also Mirenayat and Soofastaei, 2015). Transtextuality has five dimensions: intertextuality (co-presence of one text in another); paratextuality (text which surrounds text); metatextuality (text that comments on a text); architextuality (relationship between texts in a genre); and hypo/hypertextuality (text that transforms another). In this context, the photographs themselves are metatextual to the billboards they depict. In other words, the photographs provide a communicative space as much as the billboard image itself does. Through these photographs, UKIP implicitly demonstrated its financial and political capital to hire billboard space in the first place, as well as explicitly communicating the message itself. Moreover, in two of the three images (figs. 8.2 and 8.3), the billboards are accompanied by members of the party leadership. On the one hand, most photos of billboards were used to create a more compelling image than it would otherwise be for just the billboard themselves, which were simply text, or on an empty street (such as fig. 8.1). Moreover, framing the billboard alongside party leaders perhaps indicates that these photographs were taken at campaign launches, implying ongoing engagement with these issues or mutually reinforcing and validating the connection between the messages depicted and party leaders themselves. Both of these aspects imply a long-term commitment both from the party, dedicating financial and political capital which indicates importance, and the leadership, who have associated themselves clearly with the party message. Finally, having the billboard foregrounded by party leadership indicates media attention (most explicitly in fig. 8.3), further lending gravitas to both the message and the party itself.

From 2014, however, UKIP moved away from billboard photographs to simple reproductions (figs. 8.4 to 8.8). These images formed part of a broader series of content that reused images designed for billboards on social media prior to several elections, including the

European elections, Newark by-election and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2014 and general election in 2015. Though optimised for physical billboards, these images were first unveiled on and subsequently posted to various UKIP social media channels. Notably, the change from promotional photographs to replications also mirrored a change in the billboards themselves from simple text-based messages towards more striking, visually dynamic political advertising.

In his discussion of methods in critical discourse analysis, Teun van Dijk briefly analysed UKIP's 2014 billboard campaign. In particular, his description of the relevance of the billboards emphasises the divisive aspects of the campaign, stating that "many political parties, and not only at the extreme right, more or less blatantly engaged in racist and xenophobic propaganda to win votes" (van Dijk, 2016: 65). Van Dijk describes a 'triangular sociocognitive approach' to understanding discursive elements of billboards. This approach is composed of: the discursive and semiotic structures (how and why the image is constructed as it is); the cognitive structures (the sociocultural, attitudinal and ideological contexts that mediate discursive structures); and the communicative interaction between the billboard and audiences at the level of societal and political macro- and micro-structures (2016: 64-6). Though the images themselves remained unchanged between social media and the physical billboards, it is important to consider the impact of and engagement with the different mediums themselves and how this may have affected the interactions between text and audience.

The majority of images shown below were published during the 2014 European election campaign, and this campaign standardised the blueprint for UKIP's billboards in the future. Each billboard used varied imagery that reflected the varied dimensions of the party's Eurosceptic arguments. Three of the billboards (figs. 8.9, 8.11 and 8.12) concerned common tropes regarding immigration; one (fig. 8.10) aimed to delegitimise EU spending; one final image (fig. 8.13) emphasised costs of EU regulations to fuel bills. Several of the images,

therefore, were also varied: several used or combined simple stock images; another made use of an edited image; one final one utilised a staged bespoke photo for maximum effect.



Each image was branded consistently, featuring a vertical banner to the right-hand side in the UKIP colours of purple and yellow. This banner created a coherent visual theme, linking each image together and reinforcing key messages through association with other images. The banner consistently featured the UKIP logo, again as a branding technique, accompanied by a call to action (in these instances, urging audiences to ‘vote UKIP 22<sup>nd</sup> May/this Thursday’) and slogan (“take back control of our country”). Van Dijk notes that these recurring slogans form a communicative interaction between the party and prospective voters by defining context model (the situation or experience in which text creators are involved) categories such as the Setting (Time/Space), Participants, Actions and Aims. The phrasing “our country”, for instance, expresses both the space and participants through the deployment of possessive

pronouns and identification. Similarly, actions were expressed both through indirect political catchphrases (“take back control”) or direct calls to action (“[v]ote UKIP”). Finally, the call to action “[v]ote UKIP 22<sup>nd</sup> May” defines both time (election day) and aim (vote on election day). As Klymenko quotes from Bernstein (1998: 142-3), “[t]o be memorable, the slogan on a poster is usually short and simple, and slogans often contain rhyme, alliteration and assonance” (2017). Whilst the calls to action or campaign slogans themselves did not make use of these literary devices, other textual aspects often did. One board, for instance, used repetition to emphasise its message of “no border, no control” and highlight the party’s position on immigration and European freedom of movement (fig. 8.12).

Though the ‘Eurocrat’ billboard was probably the most visually complex, in terms of metrics it also one of the least engaging, receiving the least comments, third-least shares and third-least likes of all billboards. Unique amongst them, this particular image combined two elements to visually produce a schematic structure of polarisation between positive and negative representations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (van Dijk, 2016: 73). Several aspects of this image underscored the contrast between ‘us’ (the UK taxpayer on the “daily grind”) and ‘him’ (the “EU and its Eurocrats” living a “celebrity lifestyle”). The billboard’s main message was first represented by the setting, comparing the crowded commuter bus and spacious, luxurious limousine. In terms of composition, though crowded, the bus is brightly lit, whereas the limo is dark and ominous. The main subjects of each photo themselves also face each other in the final composite image, physically reflecting the antagonism of interests between the two groups. Positioned above the text on each side are small flags (a Union Flag and EU Flag respectively) as further cues to denote ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Other billboards were less complex. Another image (fig. 8.13), for instance, used simple stock imagery of a lightbulb to illustrate its message. On the one hand, the bulb simply reflected the overall theme of energy bills. However, the bulb itself also provided a punchline



for the image's tagline, "[g]reat idea", referencing the common Western symbolic of depicting sudden inspiration with the visual metaphor of a lightbulb being turned on. As with the 'Eurocrats' image, this also performed relatively poorly, receiving the least likes, second-least shares and third-least likes. Though both focused on the economic arguments against EU membership, and employed different visual techniques, neither clearly resonated much with UKIP's audience online. This likely reflected the original design's intention to be used on billboards, as, through the use of stock imagery and small text, the initial message is perhaps hard to ascertain at a glance.

Though these billboards covered a range of topics, immigration appeared to be the dominant topic for UKIP, who dedicated three images to the subject. Each used different visual arrangements to make this point. Indeed, political commentators at the time noted that UKIP hoped to "use immigration as a battering ram to break through Labour's defences in the north" (Forsyth, 2014). At the time, these billboards drew significant controversy from the mainstream media and members of all political parties (Pitel, 2014). Several politicians, for instance, described the campaign as "racist", "crass" and "[standing] for the worst in human beings: our prejudice, selfishness, and fear" (Channel 4, 2014; Gander and Wright, 2014). In *The Independent* article, the posters were compared to a previous BNP campaign (Gander and Wright, 2014).

One image (fig. 8.11) that focused on economic migration was both the simplest and most controversial. The text of the image asks rhetorically, "26 million people are in Europe looking for work. And whose jobs are they after?", referencing EU expansion to include free movement with Bulgaria and Romania. The use of rhetorical questioning presents both the premise and answer as indisputable, reinforcing the fears of those already concerned with the subject of immigration. Accompanying the text is a hand balled into a fist, index finger pointing directly at the audience, acting both as an intriguing hook to encourage the viewer to appreciate

the billboard more closely (pointing to the audience as though demanding their attention) and as punchline to the question (pointing to the audience to indicate the answer). This billboard in particular quickly became one of the key recognisable elements of the campaign. The poster, for instance, was the one chosen by van Dijk as an example in his brief analysis of the billboard series (2016: 65). In an infamous interview with Farage, LBC presenter James O'Brien referenced the billboard specifically, referring to it as a "big, clunking fist" (to which Farage responded, "that was a provocative poster..." before trailing off), as making many people feel "demonised and typified" (LBC, 2014). In a column in *the Independent*, which featured the billboard as the primary accompanying image, Farage stated that "[c]alling Ukip's posters 'racist' is yet another example of shameful Westminster evasion" (2014). Whilst the poster drew significant controversy in traditional media, it received a lukewarm reception on social media. In fact, it was the second-least liked and commented-on post published on Facebook from the campaign. However, it was also the third-most shared. Whilst this may appear contradictory, given the nature of sharing, it is worth considering that many of these shares likely came from people sharing in critical, rather than supportive, contexts. As Kim and Yang (2017) note, shares can be either affectively driven (either expressing or an expression of emotion) or cognitively triggered (requiring psychological effort and commitment) or both, relative to 'likes/reactions' (which are affective) and comments (which are, generally speaking, cognitive). Based on this, it is likely that many shares were cognitively triggered (i.e., engaged with critically as people frame/reframe their share in positive or negative manner) to account for the disparity between shares and affective reactions to it.

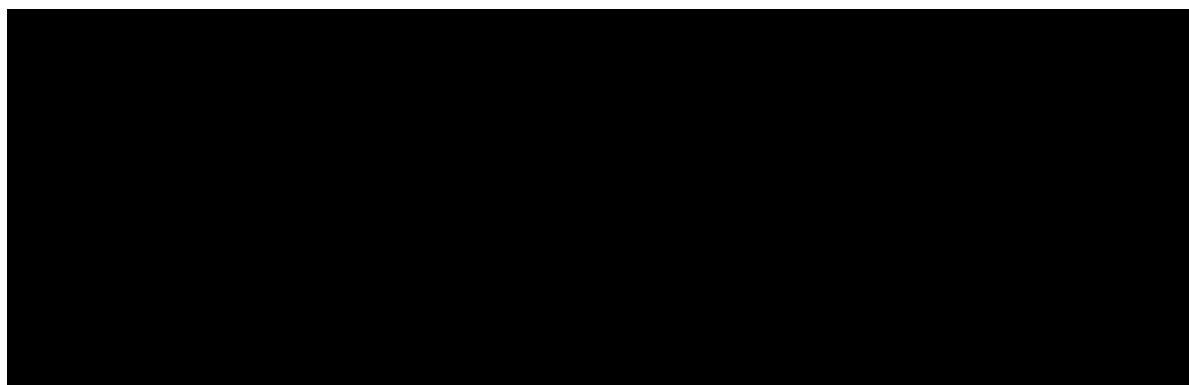
Another image (fig. 8.12) featured the White Cliffs of Dover. The Cliffs themselves represent an iconic geographical feature of England typically used to synecdochally represent the southern extent of the UK. Digitally superimposed over the cliffs themselves are an escalator. When removed from context, this might otherwise appear to be a relatively banal

inclusion. However, the escalator has now made the ordinarily formidable cliff-face scalable, rendering Britain's 'natural defences' (a recurring trope when describing UK, as an island nation, under threat) as impotent. As well as demonstrating easiness of crossing the border, the escalator also mars the iconic cliff-face, suggesting that immigration might tarnish the reified British countryside.

The second image (fig. 8.9), on the other hand, depicts a beggar on a street. His status is clearly denoted by the collection cup in front of him; however, the man is also clearly dressed for work, wearing a hard hat, steel-toed boots and a high-visibility jacket associated with construction work or similar jobs. This begs the question of the audience as to why he might need to beg in the first place. The sympathetic portrayal of the man dressed for work contrasts particularly disparaging expectations of beggars as people unable or unwilling to work, strongly disassociating him with the 'undeserving poor' conceptualisation evident within political, public and media discourses at the time (Garthwaite, 2011). Moreover, dressing as a construction worker deliberately draws upon the 'Polish builder' or 'Polish plumber' tropes that have arisen since 2004, in part due to the increasing visibility of Eastern European migrants relative to other transnational migrants (Datta and Brickell, 2009). The 'Polish builder' is one composite part of the 'took our jobs' immigration narrative, which itself is explicitly referenced by the image through the heading: "British workers are hit hard by unlimited cheap labour". Unlike the 'Eurocrat' and 'good idea' images, both the escalator and builder images clearly situate themselves within existing social attitudes on immigration by mobilising specific tropes that visually captured the cultural zeitgeist.

UKIP continued this billboard format beyond their successful European campaign. Billboards were used to publicise party candidates in the Newark by-election and South Yorkshire PCC elections in June and October. The Newark billboard broadly kept the same call to action as previously, urging viewers to "vote UKIP 5<sup>th</sup> June", though the slogan was

replaced with “[o]nly Roger Helmer will say NO to windfarms in Newark” to reinforce the campaign’s bespoke, localised message. The South Yorkshire billboard, meanwhile, omitted the slogan entirely, instead opting for a longer call to action: “[v]ote Jack Clarkson for South Yorkshire Police & Crime Commissioner on 30<sup>th</sup> October”. Both billboards featured the faces of their respective candidates, perhaps to personalise each in elections where individual characters might face more scrutiny.



(Left to right, top to bottom: 8.14, 8.15 and 8.16)

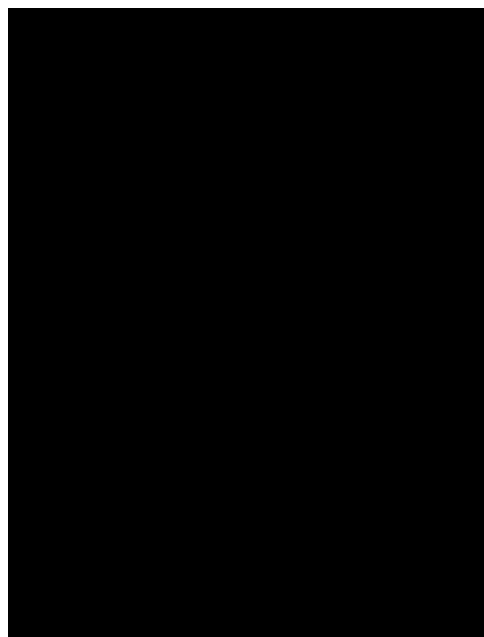
Both billboards featured digitally edited images for ostensibly humorous or witty effect. The Newark image featured the distinctive shape of a wind turbine against a blue sky, with the turbine’s arms frozen make an ‘x’ shape against the sky. Surrounding the turbine is a box, evoking the image of a marked box on a ballot paper. The accompanying text explains the significance of the turbine, stating that a vote for UKIP would be a vote for “[n]o more useless windfarms”. Linguistically, the adjective “useless” clearly signals to the audience the party’s perspective on windfarms, again presenting this as a given to appeal to those with pre-existing attitudes on turbines. The South Yorkshire billboard, meanwhile, features a red rosette. The rosette, an image strongly associated with political campaigning and, through party colours, with the Labour Party itself. Here, the rosette has been edited to say “say nothing do nothing”. This provocative tagline clearly references the Rotherham scandal, and in particular the Labour councillors who helped cover up the scandal. One final billboard, posted during the 2015

general election campaign, featured the tagline “gutted” over the picture of a fisherman, linguistically playing on the term ‘gutting fish’ (part of the fishing process) and to emphasise the effects of the Common Fisheries Policy on the industry itself (fig. 8.16).

That being said, the party did not abandon the photograph method altogether (fig. 8.17). The Yorkshire PCC election, interestingly, combined both types of post. The call to action to “back Jack” makes use of rhyme to create a catchy slogan for viewers. Unlike figure 8.15, this poster referenced Rotherham scandal explicitly by incorporating it visually into the poster. Indeed, the billboard itself used several visual elements that were also present in Britain First’s Rotherham images, though UKIP instead emphasised the ‘Labour betrayal’ angle of the story. Similar to the BF image of the girl sitting against the exposed brickwork backdrop, for instance, figure 8.17 depicts also a young woman sitting alone in a corner of a white-walled building, suggesting abandonment and loneliness. Clearly, this woman depicts the victims referenced in the text as the “1,400 reasons why you should not trust Labour again”. The whiteness of her jumper and the walls behind evoke classic Western symbolism equating the colour white with innocence and purity, emphasising the innocence of the victims. This whiteness, however, also highlights the starkness and emptiness of the walls, perhaps representing the bleakness of their situation, and also contrasts against the darkened corridor behind that suggests an ominous presence behind her.

Reverting back to this template had several advantages. First, the poster provided context (to UKIP’s campaign platform in Yorkshire) and backdrop (the ad being part of a larger campaign) for the photograph’s overlaid text that urged people to vote on polling day. Simply replicating the poster itself would not have incorporated the “5 Hours Left to Vote” and “polls close at 10” taglines, given that billboard ads are designed to be placed up for an extended period of time. Moreover, replicating the poster as a photograph taken from a side angle allowed the image creator to fit the entire landscape advert in whilst keeping the overall image

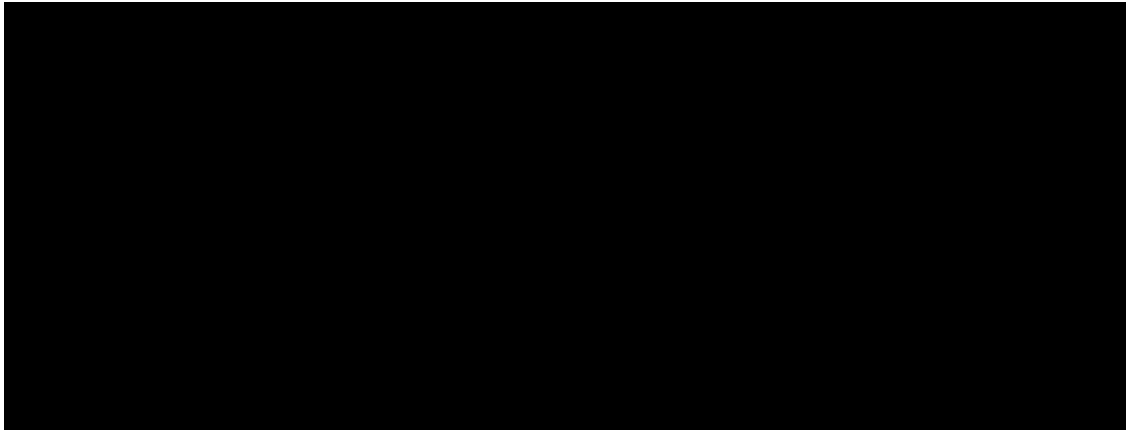
square, maximising the area of the image relative to its width. Finally, reproducing the poster as a photograph allowed UKIP to adjust the overall message of the advert for the social media medium, which both the recycled posters and other photographs failed to do. The ‘back Jack’ slogan in both the image and accompanying text reframed the call to action in a lighter, more casual way for a social media audience in contrast to the more serious “vote Jack Clarkson” call to action on the poster. The slogan “let’s give South Yorkshire its pride back” was similarly evocative.



(Fig. 8.17)

## **Data visualisation**

Alongside reproducing billboards, data visualisation was a key component to UKIP’s social media content. Unlike billboards, however, these infographics were designed specifically for social media. Nonetheless, they represented a further departure both in style and tone from Britain First’s social-specific content such as memes.



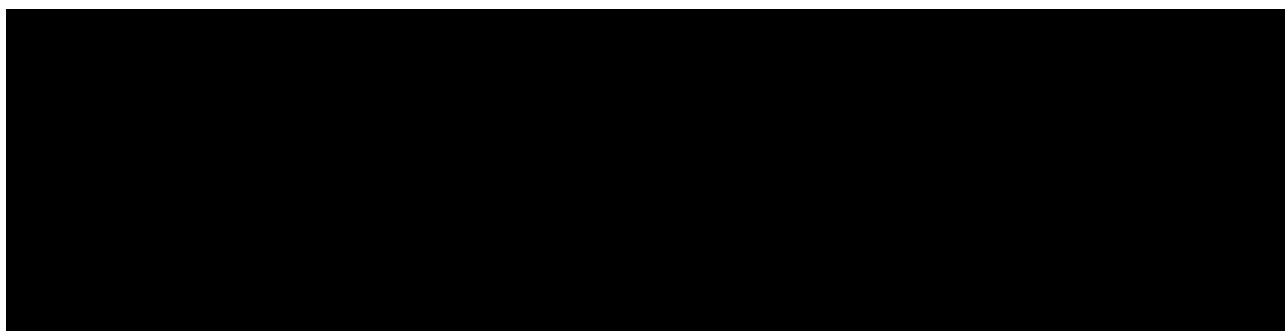
(Left to right: figs. 8.18, 8.19 and 8.20)

UKIP used data visualisation both as part of their critique of mainstream politics and political systems and to legitimise their own place as an insurgent party capable of significant electoral breakthrough. Three images depicted above (figs. 8.18, 8.19 and 8.20) show several data visualisations posted between 2013 and 2015, showing how they developed their data visualisation approach over time. The first image (fig. 8.18), published in December 2013, was taken from polls published in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Express*, depicting how current UKIP supporters voted in 2010. The image aimed to refute media narratives that the party was just a fringe Conservative group, which was one of Nigel Farage's stated key aims. The infographic itself had an amateurish design, with several overlapping elements and lacking party branding or visual identity. Moreover, the chart was the subject of the image, rather than the narrative (that UKIP was drawing voters from all over the spectrum), and as such did not signpost the core message. Though this was a recurring message for UKIP, the sloppiness of design arguably did not allow the infographic to stand out in a saturated news feed.

By 2014, however, the party moved towards more stylised, eye-catching content. The second graphic (fig. 8.19), published in July 2014, conveyed a related message featuring party voting shares from the Doncaster council by-election. As such, the graphic sought to emphasise UKIP as a viable alternative to Labour in the north of England (as with the Conservatives

elsewhere), continuing themes from the previous graphic. The strapline triumphantly states “UKIP winning here” in large, bold letters, which was then reinforced by the data, as an inversion of figure 8.18. Each party’s vote share is clearly represented by the colours of each bar, with UKIP’s purple bar presented as the leftmost and therefore most immediately eye-catching. The background of the image featured a map, which the image labelled “Ed Miliband’s own backyard”, further emphasising their win in the north.

A final image (fig. 8.20) posted in May 2015 sought to make the case for electoral reform following the 2015 general election. Using stacked bar graphs, the graphic compares UKIP’s voter share to the combined voter share of Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrats. The magnitude of the two bars shows the combined Lib Dem/Plaid/SNP bar only just tops the UKIP bar, whilst the text reads, “yet we have just one Member of Parliament to represent them all ... [w]hile the others got 67 between them”. Beneath, a call to action implores the audience to “share if you agree that the electoral system needs to change”, which subsequently resulted in over 37,500 shares and 28,000 likes.



(Fig. 8.21, 8.22 and 8.23)

Three infographics posted in 2015 (figs. 8.21, 8.22 and 8.23) also reflected a shift in UKIP’s approach to communicating their agenda on immigration. Rather than trying to argue or justify the case for reduced immigration, the party instead sought to emphasise the popularity of their platform and delegitimise the approaches of other parties. In part, this was facilitated



by the mainstream parties' general avoidance the issue in 2010, which provided UKIP with the space to position themselves as leaders of the immigration debate. Labour avoided the issue due to its perceived weakness on immigration in the eyes of 'traditional' Labour voters; Cameron, meanwhile, avoided it as part of his broader detoxification strategy; the Liberal Democrats promised more control over migration but also emphasised the need for supposed progressive policies such as earned regularisation (Flynn, Ford and Somerville, 2010). Cameron would later repeat this strategy in 2015, where he sought to deflect either by pointing to Labour's previous record on immigration, emphasise his employment and economic record and remind voters of his pledge for an in-out referendum on EU membership (Dennison and Goodwin, 2015).

Notably, each graphic made use of horizontally-plotted bar graphs to demonstrate the data. The first (fig. 8.21) depicts information from a Press Association survey measuring public trust in each party's ability to control immigration. The second (fig. 8.22) depicted net migration numbers from 2008 to 2015. The third (fig. 8.23) depicted the results of a snap Survation poll following the BBC's party leaders' debate two weeks before the 2015 general election. The second graphic particularly aimed to communicate to the audience how the establishment could not be "trusted to deal with the immigration crisis". Despite a temporary fall between 2012 and 2014, each bar consistently topped 200 thousand net immigrants per year. Here, levels of immigration were represented visually by the continuity of bar height between the red Labour and blue Conservative bars; the cluttered nature of the data (compounded by the addition of labels above the bars) visually reflected the underpinning narrative of a 'crisis' of space and resources. The first and third graphics, meanwhile, reflected public attitudes that considered UKIP "best" or "trusted" on immigration, rather than data about immigration itself. By contrast, the legitimisation of UKIP's position was depicted here instead

by the negative space and disparity in height between the purple UKIP bars and the bars representing other parties, reminding the audience of UKIP's dominance on the issue.

In both anti-establishment and anti-immigration infographics, mainstream parties were consistently labelled using recognisable party colours. Indeed, the decision to visualise the data in the second infographic as consecutive bar graphs (rather than, say, a line graph) was potentially underpinned by the creative decision to depict the immigration numbers under each government and visually demonstrate the continuity between the two governing parties. In each graphic, each party was consistently depicted by its colour. By contrast, only the UKIP logo was featured in any of the graphics (figs. 8.19, 8.20 and 8.21), reducing the differences between the parties as purely superficial represented entirely and only by colour.

Interestingly, none of the infographics made any arguments against immigration specifically. Instead, the data reflected perceived trust or weakness in UKIP and mainstream parties' stances on the issue itself. Whereas the posters, for instance, used the threat of economic migration as a justification for their rhetoric, these infographics assumed sympathy towards UKIP's immigration policy. Indeed, this was reflected in UKIP's broader campaign, including their television appearances. Goodwin noted at the time, for instance, that Farage was playing to his base with his comments about HIV health tourists during the leaders' debate. Indeed, as Richardson notes, "[s]ince the 1960s British political discourse has assumed ... that 'the British masses are racist'" (2008: 324); undoubtedly, Farage's comments at the time intended to tap into this conception. Indeed, these infographics similarly aimed to tap into the public sentiment that "British citizens specifically blame their government elites and institutions for failure to protect Britain from the potentially negative effects of immigration" (McLaren, 2013). By this point, immigration had already come to dominate the electorate by this point, whereas previous posters had to tie in immigration rhetoric with economic rhetoric to play to the population's emphasis on the economy as an issue. In 2014, one poll even found

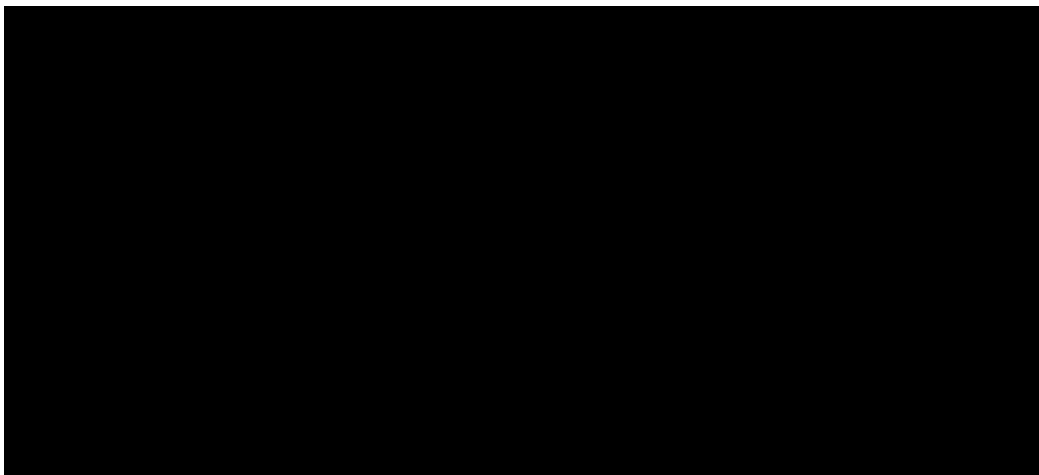
that one quarter of British people surveyed supported repatriation of both legal and illegal migrants. These infographics reflected hardening public attitudes against immigration, portraying UKIP as the dominant party on the issue.

Regardless, the infographics were emblematic of the party's aim to present itself as a legitimate, serious political actor. Whereas Britain First focused on memes and emphasised quantity of output, UKIP committed to polished, functional content and reinforced its image as a professional party distinct from groups further to the right. Partly, this was because UKIP, as a legitimate political party, could publicise polling successes, whereas BF, by contrast, had to make do with negative press coverage that was reframed as "more publicity". Whereas BF relied on social media to generate mainstream media and cultural relevance *ex nihilo*, UKIP simply used it to amplify pre-existing political relevance.

### **Use of EU flag**

UKIP's imagery often buttressed the party's self-identity as a (or, often, the) British patriotic political party. The party logo at the time, for instance, prominently depicted a stylised pound sign, implicitly contrasted against the euro as a symbol of EU interference. The more recent, controversial redesign instead incorporated a lion, another prominent English and British symbol often associated with Britain's imperial legacy and with English sports teams. UKIP often used flags in their social media content to symbolise this patriotism whilst also reducing representations of the EU to the flag itself. Engström, in his analysis of BNP content, discusses the importance of flags in visual discourse, both as marking in-group 'togetherness' and out-group 'otherness'. For in-groups, "the flag is used as a means of marking territory"; for out-groups, "flags are used in different ways to express enmity" (2014: 18).

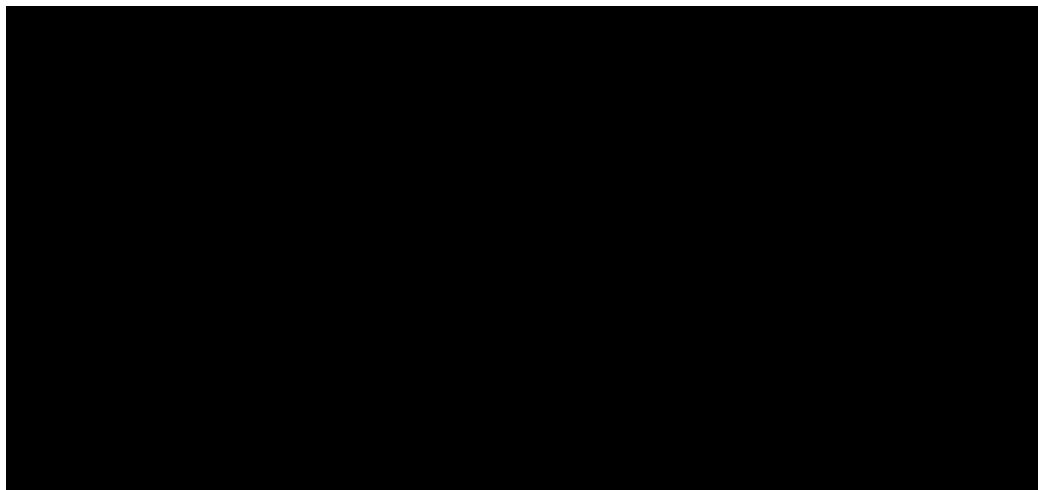
The Union Flag was almost exclusively featured with imagery associated with UKIP and, in particular, Nigel Farage. One image that was used several times featured a closeup of Farage, taken from below the eye-line to construct a more imposing and flattering portrait, foregrounded against a prominent Union Flag. This image was used across several types of content posted by UKIP to their Facebook page. The image was used, for instance, to promote Farage's TV and radio appearances (figs. 8.24 and 8.25) to maximise viewing and listener figures amongst UKIP supporters. The image was also used to create press notice-style quote graphics to transmit party opinions on specific subject matters or respond to current events in a more engaging way than simple text statuses (fig. 8.26). Finally, the image was used to celebrate specific milestones. A similar image from the same photoshoot, this time a long shot featuring Farage smiling with his arms outstretched in a jovial gesture, was also used to specifically mark achieving 80,000 Facebook likes (fig. 8.27).



(Left to  
bottom: figs.

Finally, the image was often used to depict Farage in contrast to other political figures. Figure 8.28, for instance, contrasts a confident, brightly-lit Nigel Farage, framed against the Union Flag, against a defensive-looking Nick Clegg against a dark background. The difference in how each figure is displayed implicitly portrays to the audience a confident Farage compared to an uncomfortable, worried Nick Clegg. Figure 8.29, similarly, contrasts Farage to David Cameron. This message is emphasised by the heading of the image, which asks “who do you trust to control our borders?”. Again, Farage is depicted patriotically against the Union Flag in a vividly-coloured picture; Cameron’s photo, meanwhile, uses a muted, darker and more saturated colour palette with Cameron intentionally shadowed.

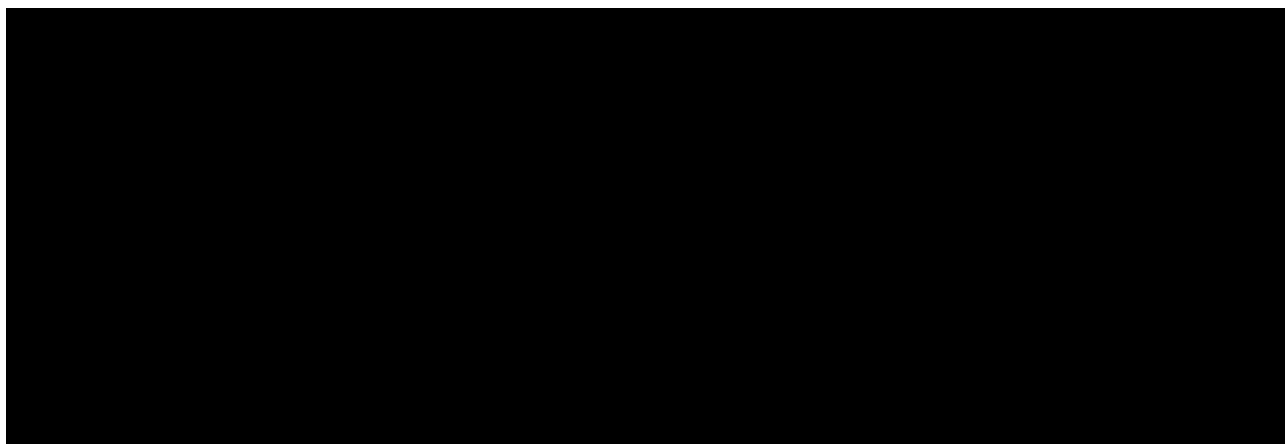
Even as UKIP revered the Union Flag and often mobilised it in their visual language, oppositional forces were also represented by or collocated with other flags and symbols. Most pertinent was the varied use of the Flag of Europe. As Engström notes, albeit regarding the BNP’s social media content, “[t]he colonizing out-group is heterogenic in one sense as it comprises everybody who disagrees with BNP policies, but it is typically Muslim” (2014: 11). Though UKIP’s out-groups were a trifecta of immigrants, establishment politicians and EU institutions, in the same way this was often reduced and homogenised as the EU itself. This trifecta was subsequently visually represented by and embodied in the European flag. Most straightforwardly, the European flag represented EU and European ‘invasion’ or ‘infiltration’ of the UK. However, the flag was also collocated with British elites or non-European immigrants, suggesting collaboration or causality and an influence beyond simply bureaucratic or institutional interference. The composition of the flag itself, along with the European passport, was referenced explicitly and continuously by senior party members throughout the EU referendum campaign through the refrain “we are more than just a star on someone else’s flag” (Farage, 2015; Maguire, 2016; O’Flynn, 2016).



(Figs. 8.30

The recognisable EU flag signposted Eurosceptic content even when the subject matter itself was not obvious. In two images posted just after the European elections, in the run-up to the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission, UKIP criticised both the process of Juncker's appointment (as part of a wider critique about EU institutional arrangements and the democratic deficit) and David Cameron's response (figs. 8.30 and 8.31). In each image, the context of Juncker's appointment was used to make broader points against the EU and David Cameron, and as such, both made use of the flag as an illustration. Simply using images of Juncker himself, for example, would perhaps undermine the point of the images as it would rely on an audience's awareness of who he was. Instead, both images made use of the flag's deep blue colour as the basis for the background. Moreover, both featured the twelve-star emblem with one star conspicuously absent. In the 'No Choice' graphic (fig. 8.30), the Better Off Out logo depicts eleven stars surrounding the word 'Britain', with a single star physically separated from the others at the far end of the logo. In the 'Utter Humiliation' graphic (fig. 8.31), meanwhile, the emblem dominates the image, with one star obscured by a torn paper effect revealing a monochrome photo of Juncker underneath. The flag, therefore, provided a recognisable touchpoint to allow UKIP to emphasise and clarify the overarching theme.

The flag was also used in several provocative images. One image, for example, was used to encourage followers to sign a petition and email their MPs against to protest against the migration restrictions being lifted on Romania and Bulgaria (Dugan, 2014). The image rhetorically asked the audience “[w]hy is David Cameron not speaking up for the 74% of Yorkshire who are against this?” (fig. 8.32). Answering the question is an image of David Cameron with a photoshopped blue gag with the EU flag covering his mouth, suggesting impotency due to EU interference. The image was expanded and reposted in the weeks leading up to UKIP’s European election success to include Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg with similar gags (fig. 8.33), with each photo showing each politician looking either uncomfortable or surprised. In contrast to Clegg, Cameron and Miliband, Farage is depicted (using the same photo from figs. 8.24-8.29) as ungagged and confident, even as the caption states “Nigel Farage will give Britain its voice back”. The EU Millions image (fig. 8.34), which was also posted during the European elections campaign, used the twelve stars emblem instead to emphasise the EU as the subject of the image. The image itself time used the EU flag to emphasise the wordplay between EuroMillions, the transnational European lottery, and ‘EU Millions’, deploying a common cost/price economic argument against EU membership (Startin, 2015) that was discussed ubiquitously prior to the 2016 EU Referendum.



(Figs. 8.32, 8.33 and 8.34)

Several billboard-style images also posted around the same time juxtaposed the EU flag with British symbols to convey the themes of invasion and assimilation. One image posted on May 19<sup>th</sup> (fig. 8.37), for instance, featured the Elizabeth Tower clock face replaced with the EU flag. The twelve stars of the flag replace the twelve numbers of the clock, and the face itself is edited to reflect the flag's blue field. Here, the graphic's tagline, that "74% of our laws are now made in Brussels", is represented by the intrusion of European symbols on British cultural icons. The foreboding pathetic fallacy of a sinister, stormy sky reflects the question posed by the graphic itself, "[w]ho really runs Westminster?", with the word "really" emphasising the insidious nature of the perceived EU takeover.

Another image posted on May 12<sup>th</sup> (fig. 8.36) followed the same theme despite its nuanced composition. The visual elements of the image attempt to evoke the potent cultural image of the female personification of Britannia, the modern reconceptualization of the Roman goddess and British equivalent to other national personifications. Here, Britannia herself is replaced by José Manuel Barroso, the then-President of the European Commission. The portrayal of Barroso is significant given UKIP's consistent opposition to him personally. In 2005, for instance, Farage successfully brought a vote of no confidence against Barroso (which he survived) after the latter was discovered to have received a free holiday with Greek shipping tycoon Spiro Latsis (Castle, 2005). In 2008, Farage questioned the competency of Barroso's Commission, asking rhetorically, "would you buy a used car from this Commission" (EURACTIV, 2008). In September 2009, Farage described Barroso's record as Commissioner as having "overseen the Lisbon agenda ... now you're telling us we have to have a commissioner for immigration ... you've pushed on with your obsession with climate change ... but above all, it's when you ignored the Irish referendum ... for that reason alone I cannot support you" (Europarl, 2009).





(Figs. 8.35, 8.36 and 8.37)

In the image, the three-pronged trident of Britannia is slung casually across Barroso's shoulder, whilst the iconic Corinthian helmet lays discarded on the floor. Most provocatively, the shield's Union Jack device has been replaced with the EU flag, reflecting the perception that EU has literally and metaphorically replaced UK institutions. Barroso is seated, as the archetypical Britannia is depicted as sitting, though he lounges upon stacks of books, clearly referencing EU rules and regulations that supports the graphic's claims that "74% of ... laws ... now made in Brussels". As such, the EU flag is depicted as imposing upon and replacing the Union Flag on Britannia's shield, just as Britannia herself is replaced by Barroso, even as EU laws are perceived as replacing British law-making and legislative institutions. The title of

the graphic, “Ruled Britannia”, further plays upon the subject of the image, both in terms of the perversion of the personification of Britain and the imposition of EU laws, as well as the patriotic song ‘Rule, Britannia’, a further subversion of British national identity.

Finally, though the image posted on April 21<sup>st</sup> (fig. 8.35) was undoubtedly the most simplistic of all images of the style, its messaging was also the most iconic and visceral. The title of the image reads “[w]ho really runs this country?”, in a similar way to the Westminster graphic. The largest visual component of the image depicts a crumpled Union Flag. The arrangement of the flag and text implies that, ordinarily, the Union Flag would provide a simple background for the image’s message, which is centred horizontally and vertically to the Saint George’s Cross aspect of the flag. In the image, however, the centre of the flag has caught alight, with flames burning the background away to reveal the ‘actual’ EU Flag underneath. Burning from the centre outwards almost perfectly reveals the twelve stars motif to the leave the audience in no doubt which flag is being depicted.

This image emulates one image described by Engström in several ways. Engström’s image depicts a Norwegian flag with areas singed away to reveal several Pakistani flags underneath. For Engström, the fire or acid that has implicitly burnt away parts of the flag signal the “the stealthy Muslim takeover of Western Europe” (2014: 15). In UKIP’s image, the flames themselves are given more prominence, symbolising violence, war and aggression, distinct from the creeping conquest of the Big Ben image and Engström’s Norwegian image. Moreover, both graphics depict the defacement of each flag. Again, Engström notes that, for true nationalists, “[f]lags are national symbols intended to be saluted or revered, not defiled, at least not by the in-group for which the flag is used as an emblem” (2014: 15). Obviously, the fire represents a visceral defilement of the flag even as the EU flag (or the Pakistani flags, in Engström’s case) are undamaged and revealed by the flag’s destruction. Moreover, the blue background of the Saint Andrew’s Cross aspect of Union Flag has been adjusted to take on a

purple hue. Adjusting the blue of the Saltire both implicitly emulates UKIP purple, associating the party with national pride by claiming the flag itself, and subtly emphasises the blue of the EU Flag and drawing the audience's eye to that element of the image. Ironically, however, despite attempting to display national pride in calling for protecting the flag, it is the flag itself that has been edited and has given way to UKIP's branding and visual identity, whereas the EU Flag remains intact. Therefore, even as UKIP appeals to the nature of nationalists to respond emotively to the image of the flag's destruction, it is UKIP itself that has altered and defiled the flag whilst blaming the EU.

### **Legitimising the immigration debate**

Under the leadership of Nigel Farage, UKIP had already begun to broaden its appeal beyond Euroscepticism to lead the UK debate on immigration (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Early manifestations of anti-immigrant rhetoric focused on perceived effects of immigration. In 2014, posters discussed above (fig. 8.9, 8.11 and 8.12) all conspicuously avoided depicting immigrants as their primary images, despite the provocative and controversial nature of them. Instead, the emphasis focused instead on symbolic representations of perceived effects on the British people (fig. 8.9) and landscape (fig. 8.12). This was in notable distinction to the 'Eurocrat' poster (fig. 8.10), which explicitly contrasted the commute of the 'Eurocrats' and the British people respectively.

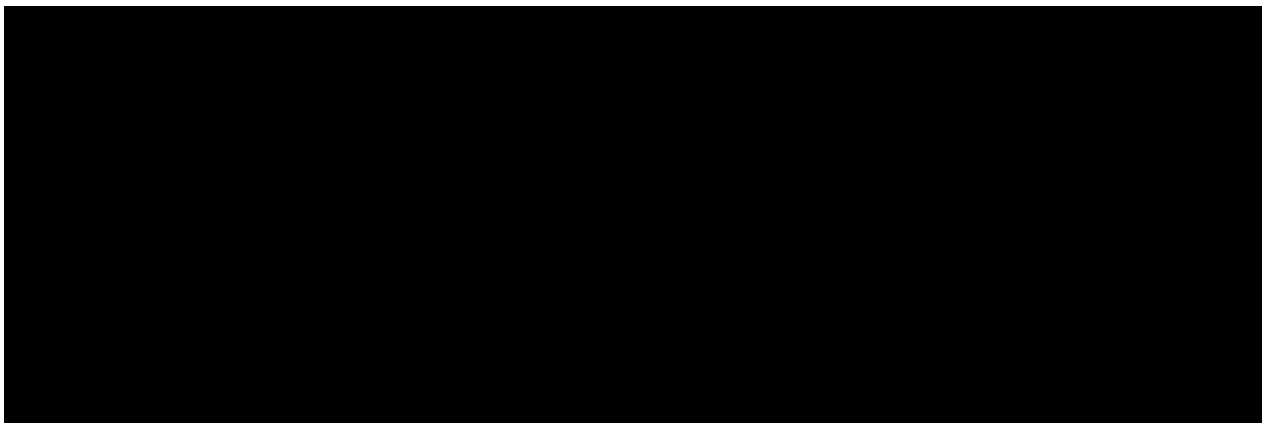
By 2016, however, the party had doubled down on anti-immigration rhetoric. Three images posted in the lead up to the 2016 local elections and EU referendum focused on the symbolism of queues to convey the concept of overcrowding (figs. 8.38, 8.39 and 8.40). The least controversial image of these (fig. 8.40) again did not explicitly depict migrants explicitly.

Instead, the image featured queues of cars in traffic, indicated by the red rear brake lights of each car. The accompanying text, both in the post text and superimposed over the image itself, identifies the scene as “[t]he school over-run”. Here, wordplay between ‘school run’, referring to the act of dropping schoolchildren off at school by car, and ‘overrun’ (synonymous occupation or inundation), situated perceived effects of immigration in a tangible context for the audience. In the top right of the image, unobscured by text and visually reinforcing the school setting, stands a school crossing guard, known as ‘lollipopers’ or ‘lollipop men/ladies’, marked by their distinctive, circular high-visibility stop sign.

Situating the image within the context of a school reflects broader fears about the impact of immigration on public services, which was a key theme in UKIP’s anti-immigration rhetoric. In 2015, 72 percent of respondents to an Ipsos MORI poll cited pressure on public services as their reason for restricting EU freedom of movement, whilst research by NatCen’s 2015 British Social Attitudes survey found that 71 percent and 63 percent of respondents respectively felt that schools and the NHS were being stretched by immigration more than was being gained through migrants’ tax and staffing contributions (Ipsos MORI, 2015; Lister, 2016). Despite being roundly debunked by experts as a myth (Payne, 2016), this sentiment was perpetuated by high-profile Conservatives Owen Paterson and Priti Patel as well as UKIP figures like Nigel Farage (BBC, 2015c; Paterson, 2015; Wheeler, 2016).

However, two images did depict immigrants directly. Each image also showed a scene that referenced the ‘overcrowding’ theme. Both featured queues of supposed immigrants, curving from top to bottom, extending far out of frame at both ends. The first (fig. 8.38), posted prior to the 2016 local elections, featured an illustration of a queue of people beneath a banner reading “UK Border”. Here, the border is not presented as a barrier, but instead as a banner suggesting a welcoming context like the entrance to a fete or the finish line of a race. Beside the people, the accompanying text asserts that “open door immigration isn’t working” in thick,

black lettering. Both the queue and lettering stand out visually against the image's plain white background, drawing the eye to both elements through contrast and the use of negative space. The second (fig. 8.39), posted one week before the EU referendum, featured a provocative photograph of Syrian refugees. The text bluntly describes the situation as “breaking point”, suggesting existential threat by evoking the idea of a structural collapse. This threat is reinforced by capitalised red letters. The subtitle, barely visible, explains simply that “[t]he EU has failed us all”. This was reiterated in the accompanying text, which explicitly referred to the UK as the object under threat.



(Fig. 8.38, 8.39 and 8.40)

All three posts emphasised ‘control’ as the necessary consequence of perceived overcrowding, either as part of the image or accompanying text. Figure 8.38 asserts that “only UKIP will control our borders” as its subtitle. Interestingly, the “control our borders” part of the sentence was highlighted from the rest of the subtitle using emphatic bold black text, differentiated from the call to action, which was coloured purple. Figure 8.39, meanwhile, implored voters “break free of the EU and take back control”, directly blaming the EU for the ‘lack of control’, whilst figure 8.40 urged its audience to “take back control of our borders now”, creating a sense of urgency. Significantly, the repeated use of ‘us’ and ‘our’ makes explicit that the audience is part of the in-group under threat, thus directly challenging the

audience to act and vote UKIP. Insisting that the EU has failed ‘us’, for instance, frames the story as a tragic one; referring to the borders as ‘ours’ similarly reminds the audience of their ownership over these borders and urges them to take them back from the EU that has taken ‘control’ away. This use of ‘us/our’ was also used by Farage during his referendum tour, in which he often asked the audience to chant along with him “we want our country back”. ‘We’ in this context implies consensus and inclusion, whereas ‘our country’ claims ownership over it against external influences; ‘back’ reinforces the conception that it has been ‘taken’ or ‘invaded’ and needs to be actively reclaimed.



**(Fig. 8.41): image**

*Solution'*

Unsurprisingly, both images were controversial and the ‘breaking point’ poster in particular drew significant criticism. Farage, in response, refused to apologise for the poster, replying to a question from the press that “I can’t apologise for the truth” (Cowburn, 2016). The same week, the poster was reported to the Metropolitan Police by Unison’s Dave Prentis (Stewart and Mason, 2016). After the referendum, UKIP MP Douglas Carswell described the posters as “morally indefensible” and asserted that “Vote Leave prevailed precisely because we did not campaign as an extension of UKIP, but as an upbeat, optimistic insurgency for change” (2016). The poster generated further controversy on social media when it emerged

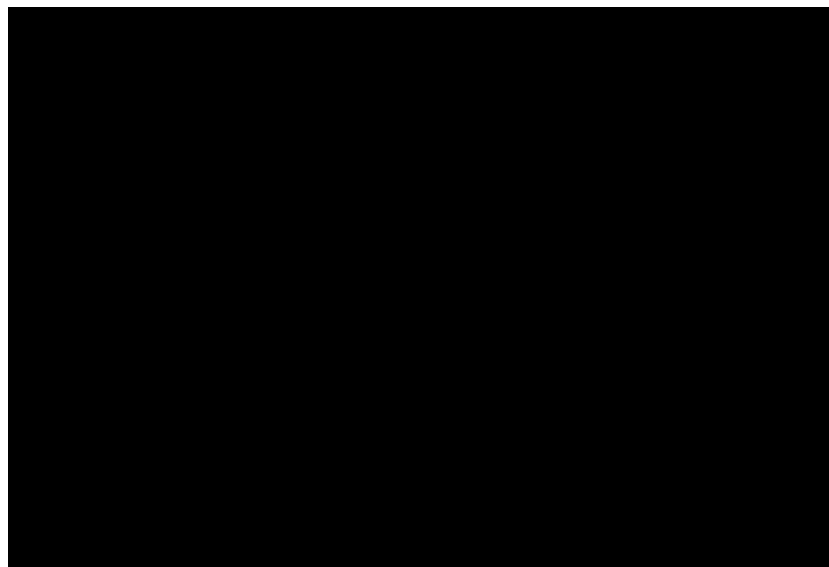
that a white male had been obscured by the banner at the bottom, leading many to speculate on social media that the poster was deliberately emphasising the ‘Otherness’ and ‘foreignness’ of the refugees (*New Statesman*, 2016).

Many publicly associated the poster with interwar fascist imagery. Several mainstream politicians and media outlets, such as Michael Gove, George Osborne, the *New Statesman* ‘Media Mole’ and American playwright Bonnie Greer (who had clashed with Farage in the past), compared it to Nazi propaganda (Cowburn, 2016; Riley-Smith, 2016; Wright, 2016). One Twitter user, who was referenced in media coverage of the poster controversy, shared an image that demonstrated the similarities between UKIP’s image and a Nazi propaganda film warning about Jewish refugees (fig. 8.41). In both images, the column of refugees can be observed curving from top to bottom to the right of the frame, following a path through a field of grass. Similarly, in the ‘Breaking Point’, ‘UK Border’ and Nazi propaganda, the audience can see the magnitude of the column of people due to the vantage point of the camera. As Richardson notes, this elevated angle projects a subordinated power relation on image subjects with respect to the viewer (2008: 327). This, Richardson explains, represents a typical contradiction in radical right ideology, in that the “ethnic other”, portrayed as a barbaric, chaotic horde, simultaneously poses a threat to us through their numbers and ideology whilst also being at the mercy of an empowered ‘Us’ who can manage this ‘Other’.

### **Critiquing the establishment**

UKIP’s populist-style content often criticised political, economic and media elites. In particular, the party sought to delegitimise political opponents, both abroad (as part of their Euroscepticism) and at home. Though conference speeches and TV appearances senior party

members (including Nigel Farage) would often refer to the party as libertarian, the overwhelming majority of UKIP's political commentary was aimed at establishment politicians and political parties, rather than libertarian critiques of British political institutions. UKIP often criticised different parties on different policies, trying to outflank both Labour and the Conservatives on issues of traditional strength such as healthcare, immigration and Europe respectively. However, the party's rhetoric also tried to portray mainstream politicians as all the same. Similarly, these same politicians were also portrayed as imitators, copying UKIP's policies and agenda.



(Figs. 8.42 and 8.43)

In terms of critiques of the left, UKIP's posts sought to portray them as hypocritical. Whilst UKIP aimed to exploit Labour's perceived weaknesses on immigration relative to the sentiments of a significant proportion of its base, it also sought to tackle Labour on the NHS and address one area of weakness of UKIP's own. One image, published in 2014, claimed that "Labour wants you to pay for to see your GP", despite UKIP leadership itself previously having called for NHS privatisation (Taylor, 2016). The image was posted following a *Daily Mail* article that stated, "Labour peer Lord Winston claims patients should be charged for treatment

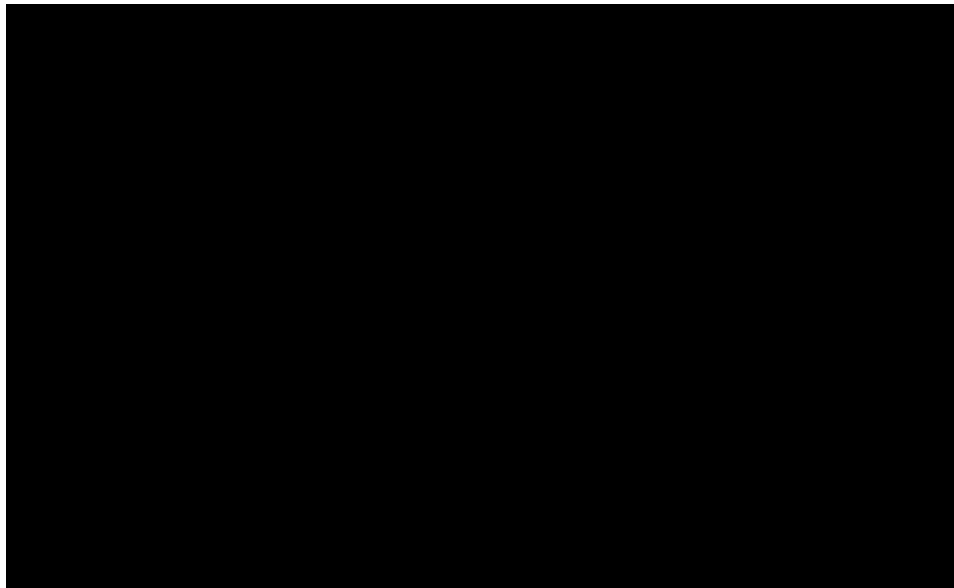


to stop taking health service for granted” (Williams, 2014). Notably, the image conflated the words of Lord Winston as ‘Labour’ for greater impact. The majority of the image was dominated by text, with the word “pay” in larger, stylised red typeface, emphasised through visual hierarchy and vivid colour. The post featured two calls to action, encouraging viewers to “to spread the word” using Facebook’s in-built share function to maximise exposure, which perhaps led to the image receiving almost double the shares as it did reactions.

A second image continued the theme of portraying left-wing figures at odds with ordinary people through an image contrasting Nigel Farage and Russell Brand. The image was posted following Farage’s appearance on BBC’s *Question Time* alongside Brand, in which the latter described Farage as “a pound shop Enoch Powell” (Hooton, 2014; McElvoy, 2014; Press Association, 2014). In retaliation, UKIP’s image contrasted Brand’s millionaire status “15 million... quid in the bank” to Farage’s democratic mandate of “4.5 million... votes from the British people”, rhetorically asking the audience “who represents you?”. The contrast between the two was visually reinforced by the contrast between the light, predominately white image of Brand and the darker image of Farage in a studio setting. In an inversion of most other images described here, the contrast between light and dark did not equate literal darkness to metaphorical darkness; likely, the image of Brand was chosen for maximum contrast to a readily available image of Farage rather than reflecting any symbolic meaning, suggesting practical limitations on creating content. Moreover, linguistically, the repetition of “million...” links the two phrases to strengthen the comparison between them. As a call to action, the image also encouraged viewers to “share around”, contributing to its virality (achieving 14 thousand likes and over 6 thousand shares).

By contrast, UKIP’s criticisms of the Conservatives often focused on outflanking the Conservatives as the party of Euroscepticism and control on immigration. Two images sought to portray Cameron’s stance on EU membership as dishonest. Cameron had been consistently

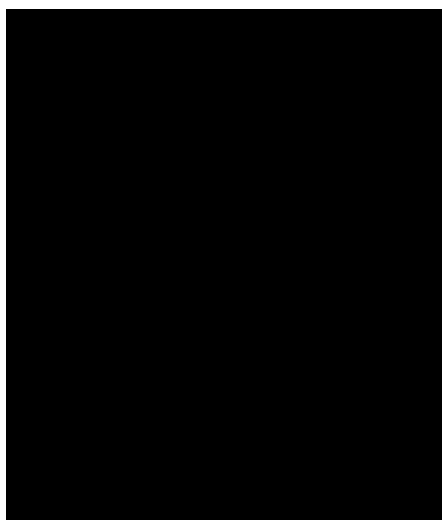
criticised by Farage through UKIP's social media channels since 2011 for "letting you all down like a cheap pair of braces" on his "cast iron guarantee" of an EU Referendum (UKIP, 2011). In the lead-up to the referendum itself, Farage criticised Cameron outright in the media for being a "Eurofanatic" who had "won elections and won votes by pretending to be a Eurosceptic" (BBC, 2016b).



(Fig. 8.44 and 8.45)

As such, both images aimed to portray Cameron as a liar. The first image, posted in October 2014, featured a concerned-looking Cameron standing in front of a darkened Westminster surrounded by storm clouds, suggesting a sense of dread following the "failed" EU Referendum Bill. The text at the bottom agitated viewers to "share if you're sick of Cameron's lies", with the word "share" highlighted in yellow and "Cameron's lies" written in a typeface to suggest it had been handwritten angrily; the post received over 29 thousand shares reflecting this call to action. A second image, posted in October 2013, instead used visual symbolism to portray Cameron as a liar. Here, a picture of Cameron in profile had been edited to give himself a long, thin nose, evoking the iconic story of Pinocchio, in which the eponymous character's nose grew whenever he lied. Interestingly, UKIP featured Cameron in front of a Union Flag, which,

as discussed, has often represented patriotism in UKIP's other content, rather than an EU flag to emphasise the subject of discussion.

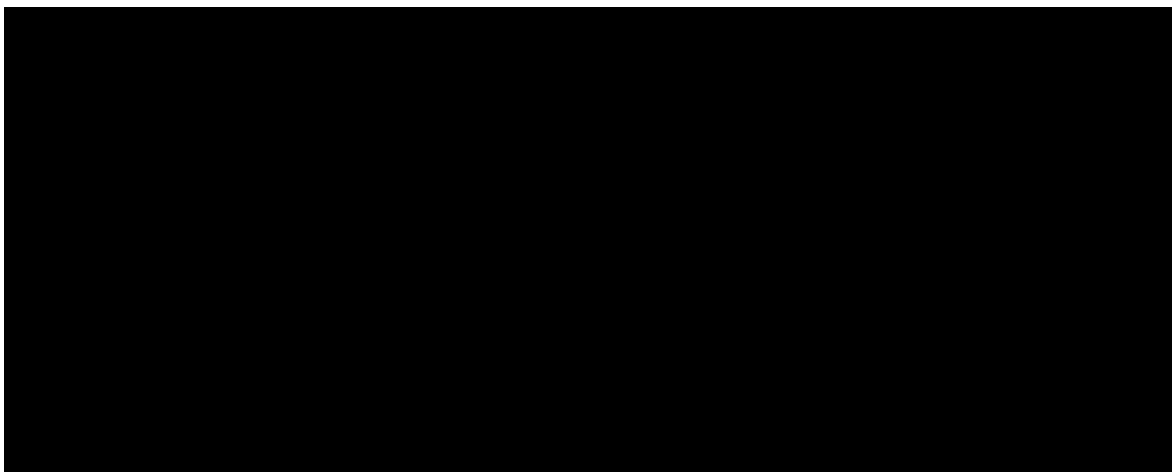


(Fig. 8.46)

The edited 'Pinocchio Cameron' was reproduced several times in several contexts. Prior to the previous post, the image was also used on election billboards (fig. 8.46) in the run-up to the European elections. Unlike the aforementioned image, however, the billboard featured Cameron alongside similarly edited images of Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband, beneath the banner headline "[t]hey are lying about EU migration". This billboard in particular represented part of a broader theme to equate all mainstream political leaders to one another. Beyond the thematic link of the long nose, each leader was presented as facing the same way, reinforcing the idea of similarity between them.

This theme resonated throughout the corpus. One image (fig. 8.48), posted several months after the billboard photo, again reinforced the similarity between the leaders. The image made use of a particular photo that depicted all mainstream party leaders standing together. Visually, 'sameness' was emphasised by the body posture and attire of each leader, all facing off-camera, presumably at some object of interest. Moreover, each is shown wearing a similar navy blue suit and white shirt. These visual elements recurred in the 'Halloween' image (fig. 8.49). Both Cameron and Miliband here are depicted wearing dark grey suits and white shirts,

further emphasised by the repeated motif of majority of their faces being obscured. The only obvious difference between them is the colour of each tie, linking each leader to their respective political party and perhaps symbolically suggesting the perceived superficiality of the differences between them. The masks themselves, depicting a grinning Farage, form the focus of the image, further reflecting the similarity between the two as each attempts to imitate Farage. Ironically, the context of Halloween is that people dress up as themed, often scary, costumes; here, Miliband and Cameron – the ‘men behind the mask’ – are presented as the scary alternatives, reinforced by their uninviting expressions which are hinted at as the literal ‘mask is slipping’.



(Fig. 8.47, 8.48 and 8.49)

The visual sameness of mainstream party politicians reflected the text overlaid on each image. For the ‘Enough is Enough’ image, the text reads “we can’t try the same old politics with the same old politicians and expect a different result”. The quote itself builds a sense of rhythm through the repetition of “same old politics/politicians” that is then undercut by “different result”. This references an Albert Einstein quote, “madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result”, explicitly equating voting for those parties as ‘madness’ for those frustrated with the establishment. For the Halloween image, the text simply

states “beware cheap imitations”, which similarly reduces and universalises both Miliband and Cameron.

The significance, longevity and primacy of this narrative was reflected in a cover photo uploaded in 2013 (fig. 8.47). The cover photo took the form of an animation, where the leaders of each party are observed riding HS2. Each leader is dressed as a stereotyped version of themselves. Cameron, wearing a morning suit and top hat, evokes either *Thomas the Tank Engine*’s Fat Controller, reflecting the HS2 theme, or otherwise ‘Rich Uncle Moneybags’, mascot of the game *Monopoly* (as well as his past in the Bullingdon Club). Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband are dressed as boilermen, in monochrome yellow and red reflecting their party colours respectively; Miliband waves a red flag, an iconic socialist symbol. Each leader sits astride HS2, inferring sameness from the tacit support for it. Athwart the tracks stands Farage, having just erected a barrier labelled UKIP. Clearly, the contrast here is drawn between the mainstream politicians who are all (literally) aboard the HS2, and UKIP who are presented as the only party to stop it.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has reviewed several key images from the UKIP dataset. In summary, UKIP’s social media content was significantly less visually impactful or as grounded in internet traditions compared to Britain First. Instead, UKIP simply reproduced many pieces of offline content, either as direct uploads or as photographs. Content designed specifically for social media often took the form of data visualisation rather than memes. In terms of content itself, the use of flags, anti-immigrant and anti-establishment rhetoric used potent visual symbolism to get the group’s message across.

## Conclusion

This thesis is an empirical contribution in support of the theoretical critical approach to social media advanced by scholars such as Feenberg, Fuchs, Sandoval, Allmer and others. It uses these theoretical underpinnings to provide a detailed look at two radical right groups, Britain First and UKIP, to explain the online success of these groups between 2010 and 2016, which themselves contradict techno-determinist conceptualisations of social media. It examines how the success of these groups were mediated by both social media logics and social pressures by examining changes in ideologies and mediums used over time. BF in particular responded to algorithmic arrangements and followed internet norms in communication, whereas UKIP's social media success was secondary to their traditional media strategy.

Due to the relative lack of empirical contributions using the critical approach, techno-determinist approaches to social media have dominated the popular debate. This has been perpetuated by the false dichotomy drawn between techno-optimist contributors such as Shirkey, Castells and Jenkins and techno-pessimist opponents such as Gladwell and Morozov. Neither side fully accounts for the contradictory, dialectical relationship that exists between society and social media. Critical theory instead recognises that technology and society exist in a state of mutual reinforcement through design (society's influence on technology) and assessment (technology's influence on society) and that social media platforms function as sites of power and counter-power that may amplify or diminish political actions and counteractions alongside other factors.

### Summary of findings

This thesis aimed to answer the question: why were radical right groups such as Britain First and UKIP successful at using social media between 2010 and 2016, and what were the outcomes of this, given that this did not translate into consistent electoral success? Following comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research into both groups, this thesis found that BF were responsive to social media logics such as algorithmic arrangements and targeted advertising, whilst also taking advantage of seminal political and electoral events. UKIP, by contrast, were successful due to their increasing use of populist rhetoric, but only consistently used social media until 2014, after which they prioritised traditional media.

This was likely due to the necessity of Britain First maintaining its Facebook presence to remain politically and media relevant. From the quantitative study, BF relied on Facebook to engage in group-building, such as fundraising, to promote its official shop and to mobilise followers. This was demonstrated by their pivot from image-based content to videos and links as ways to communicate ideology. Moreover, their use of memes demonstrated an understanding of internet communication norms, and allowed them to use humour to delegitimise political opponents or present rhetoric as common sense. This meant that their propaganda continued to reach millions of people, even as their messages hardened against religious, cultural and racial minorities. Facebook was also a useful campaign tool for BF, allowing them to spread election materials or promote petitions quickly and cheaply. They also used Facebook to respond quickly to seminal events, such as fundraising legal fees when faced with prosecution or responding to media reports associating them with the perpetrator of the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox.

UKIP, naturally, were not as dependent on social media for financial and electoral support and widespread exposure, and this was reflected in their social media strategy. First, the group's political messages were more limited, dominated by several major ideological

positions: anti-globalisation (particularly Euroscepticism); anti-establishment sentiment; and (in later years) nativism (particularly anti-immigrant culture-based prejudice). Given UKIP's origins as a Eurosceptic Conservative pressure group that came to prominence by positioning itself as a key contributor within the UK's immigration debate (Ford and Goodwin, 2014), the focus on these areas through social media reflect broader shifts within the party. Second, though the party used Facebook as a source of group news and as a means of mobilisation, they did not rely on social media as a source of funding, even when experiencing financial struggles in 2013. Finally, in terms of messages, UKIP preferred a professional style of content, such as reusing billboard images, photographs and data visualisation.

### **Future avenues of research**

As discussed in Chapter 3, several practical limits were placed on the scope of research. One future avenue of research might be to address these omissions. Though this thesis has provided as complete an overview of Britain First and UKIP's social media strategy as possible, another avenue of research to complement this study could be an examination of their presence on micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and Gab. Gab in particular presents an intriguing comparison to Twitter due to its position as a 'free speech social network' in contradistinction to Twitter's terms of use, making it much more favourable to non-mainstream groups particularly on the radical right (see Sanduja, 2017). However, it should be noted that both groups were less successful on Twitter compared to Facebook, and indeed, compared to other political parties. Moreover, it should be noted that the number of Twitter follows are less likely to indicate genuine support or voting preference for a political party than Facebook



follows (Perraudin, 2014). As such, a study of UKIP and BF supporters' rhetoric on these platforms might be more useful than an examination of the parties themselves.

Similarly, continuing analysis beyond 2016 could present another complementary empirical study. Research here might consider changes in rhetoric and social media use following UKIP's shift rightwards under Gerard Batten or group mobilisation during the 2017 snap general election. However, this might be less applicable to Britain First, given the arrests and convictions of Golding and Fransen for racially aggravated assault in September 2017 and March 2018 respectively and the subsequent deletion of its Facebook page (though it has since created a new one) (Dearden, 2019).

Otherwise, situating analysis against mainstream parties or more liberal or left-wing non-mainstream groups might provide interesting contrast. Fuchs has already studied how Twitter discourses have framed Jeremy Corbyn during the 2015 Labour leadership contest using anti-socialist or 'red-baiting' ideologies (2016d). This provides an interesting starting point for the analysis of UK left-wing groups. Since this study began, Momentum, a third-party socialist grassroots campaign group in support of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, for instance, has emerged as a significant social media movement (Booth and Hern, 2017; Pickard, 2017). Beyond Momentum, another avenue of future research could be the study of niche left-wing groups such as the Trade Union and Socialists Coalition, Socialist Workers Party, Respect Party (now defunct) or Communist Party of Britain. Notable disadvantages to studying these parties in particular is, unlike the radical right groups examined in this study or indeed Momentum, none of these groups have been characterised as politically relevant nor successful on social media.

One final avenue of research could be to research groups in different countries. Whilst this avenue may be fruitful, it is also worth considering differences that need to be delineated between this thesis and those prospective studies. First, those studies should also consider

relative rates of internet and social media penetration within society. As Evgeny Morozov describes, social media datafication regimes are more exploitative of economically-poorer individuals than the rich by offering ostensibly free, time-saving digital services in exchange for data. This benefits platform owners both by being used to improve platform functionality to intensify data collection by keeping users online for longer or to target users with personalised advertising (Morozov, 2014a; 2014b; 2015d; see also Fuchs, 2014c; 2015).

Second, studies should also consider global inequalities in social media penetration. Western social media platforms, for instance, are more exploitative of users living in the Global South than those in the Global North. This is embodied in Facebook's internet.org initiative in South America, Africa and south-east Asia, which offers Facebook and several other apps for free but charges for the rest at a rate dependent on data usage (Morozov, 2015d; 2015e). Not only does global user data therefore benefit these American companies, but these same users must also buy greater internet access from Facebook itself. Any analysis must consider how these regimes affect people unequally across the world.

Third, they should consider the prevalence of alternative social media channels in different countries, particularly when these platforms reflect differences in regimes of censorship or political control of internet access. In China, users use Weibo and WeChat, whereas in Russia, VK is a popular alternative to Facebook. This has implications when comparing social media logics across platforms, such as the how user behaviour is mediated by algorithms and how the ownership structures of these platforms are arranged. Analyses of these platforms may be more appropriate when researching groups in these countries or provide interesting comparisons to Western counterparts.

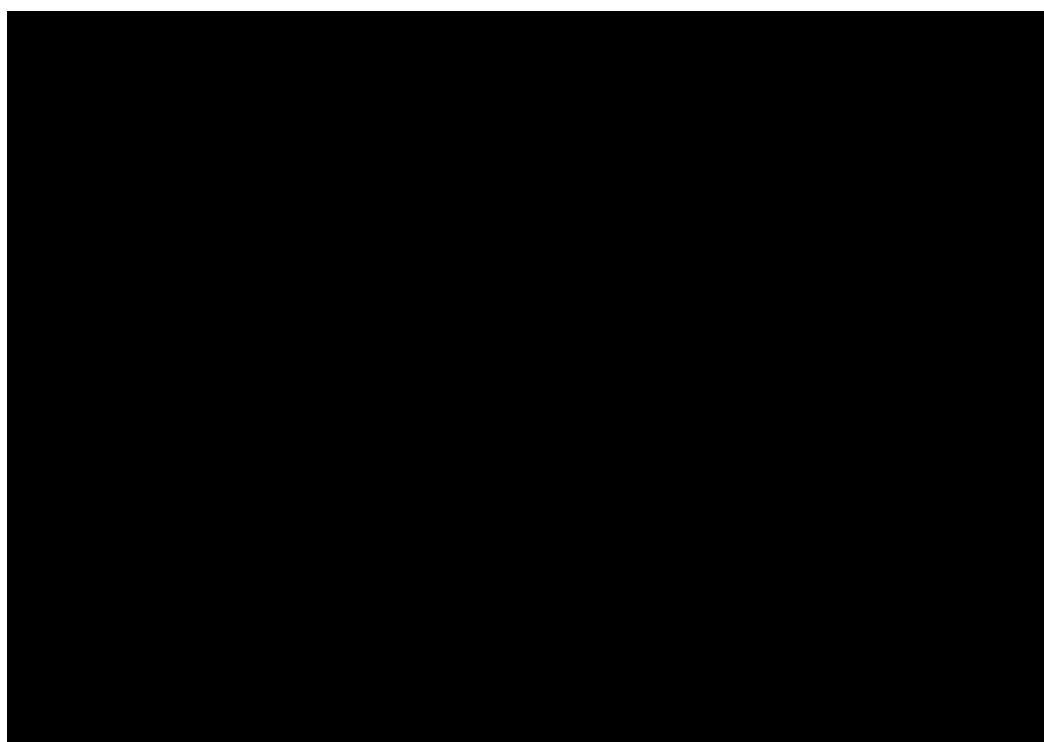
## **Policy impact**

Journalists, politicians and social media companies should not minimise the real-world effects radical right rhetoric can have. Posts conveying prejudiced, nativist or nationalist ideology contribute to the discrimination and racism felt by Muslims and people of colour and reinforce stereotypes or perpetuate disinformation unchallenged. Moreover, they are used to incite extreme direct action, such as Britain First's rallies or so-called Christian Patrols. Donald Trump's retweets of Jayda Fransen in 2017 have also indicated a normalisation of elements of radical right discourse in the West, despite the media backlash both parties received (Agerholm, 2017).

As Helen Margetts has observed, the fact that these people can be reached online may yet be an early warning signal that this phase of radical right emergence may not yet be finished. Margetts has hypothesised that a future UKIP-style populist party, absorbing or otherwise supported by a sympathetic Britain First-style movement, might effectively buttress against the limitations of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system (2016). Margetts' prediction may already be proving true. Under the banner of the 'Free Tommy Robinson' campaign, organised to protest against the sentencing of former EDL leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon for contempt of court, several radical right groups and other extreme movements have coalesced in support of anti-establishment radicalism, Islamophobia and freedom of speech. Recently, Yaxley-Lennon joined UKIP at the invitation of current leader Gerard Batten as an adviser on "rape gangs and prison reform" (BBC, 2018).

The critical approach is equally applicable to policymaking at the corporate, national and international levels. Though the US Commerce and Judiciary Committees, UK DCMS Committee, International Grand Committee and European Parliament have in the last few years attempted to bring social media companies under increasing and public scrutiny, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have thus far avoided decisively clamping down on extreme nationalist

and nativist rhetoric. Instead, lawmakers have focused on the issues surrounding data use and privacy, Cambridge Analytica scandal and alleged Russian electoral interference. Whilst these issues warrant investigation, the comparable lack of scrutiny into extreme radical right narratives has allowed social media companies to continue to operate with uneven approaches to hate speech and racism on their platforms whilst they benefit monetarily from advertising alongside these same posts (Marx, 2019). Bringing the critical approach to lawmakers' understandings of social media would perhaps encourage better policymaking in these areas.



(Figs. c.1 and c.2)

Though Facebook recently deleted several accounts associated with Britain First in 2018 as part of a clampdown on “Facebook fascists” (Hearn and Rawlinson, 2018), little has been done to address broader systemic issues that facilitated BF’s emergence. Other groups have since emerged to take BF’s place in the wake of Fransen and Golding’s arrest. The ‘For Britain’ movement, for example, has gained increasing exposure online, achieving 30,000 followers. Notably, For Britain has used similar methods to BF, emphasising populist policies

such as preventing animal cruelty and opposing political correctness as a ‘honey-trap’ gateway to more extreme content. More alarmingly, the movement has published several images (figs. c.1 and c.2) that use the same themes and symbolism as BF’s nativist literature (Chapter 7). Simultaneously, individual radical right social media personalities have come to international prominence, amplifying extreme, prejudiced narratives.

With the simultaneous rise of radical right governments across Europe, such as in Hungary and Italy, and with Brexit further deepening political divides and alienating citizens from other political parties in Britain, it is more important than ever for academics to provide critical insights and make sense of an increasingly chaotic political landscape.

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## Appendix

### Thematic coding sheet

There is little academic consensus in ascribing particular characteristics to the radical right milieu without contrasting to another political families. Of particular contention are traditional characterisations of xenophobia, nationalism, and anti-democratism (Hainsworth, 2000: 5). Further compounding the issue is that academics are not in consensus about how many characteristics are actually required. Cas Mudde states that literature on the radical right has largely glossed over attempting to write strict characteristics or have ranged from listing one singular characteristic to ten (1995: 228). Husbands, for example, gives just racial exclusionism is the common characteristic (1981) whilst Eatwell only gives nationalism (Carter, 2005: 14). Falter and Schumann, meanwhile, list:

“[e]xtreme nationalism, ethnocentrism, anti-communism, anti-parliamentarianism, anti-pluralism, militarism, law-and-order thinking, a demand for a strong political leader and/or executive, anti-Americanism and cultural pessimism” (Muddle, 1995: 229).

This study does not take a position on these but rather attempts to quantify what ideologies were espoused by both groups and how often. The characteristics listed above were used as a starting point for this coding sheet to measure the broad ideological positions. A section of the corpus for each group was then selected at random and thematic coding was undertaken. The coding sheet was expanded to include more overarching themes and to inform specific

narratives within these broader ideological stances. Coding was then undertaken for the entire corpus with the revised coding frame.

## **Nativism**

Nativism was coded as distinct from nationalism to distinguish between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ forms of “nationalism in general” (Rooduijn, 2013). Cas Mudde describes nativism as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state” (2007: 19). Thus, nativism was measured as a negative set of ideas, in that they emphasised the negativity of out-groups without explicit reference to positivity towards the in-group.

### *- Anti-Semitism*

Hostility, prejudice and negative stereotyping towards people of Jewish faith, distinct from secular critiques of Judaism.

This included: common anti-Semitic tropes, such as “religious [anti-Semitism] (Jew as Christ-killer), economic (Jew as banker, usurer, money-obsessed), social (Jew as social inferior, ‘pushy’, vulgar, therefore excluded from personal contact), racist (Jews as an inferior “race”), ideological (Jew regarded as subversive or revolutionary) or cultural (or as undermining the moral and structural fiber of civilization)” (Harap, 1987: 24); caricaturing Jewish people with imagery of the “Shylock stereotype” (Harap, 1987: 24); homogenising all Jewish people as following Hasidic, ultra-Orthodox or Orthodox Judaism; and/or ‘new anti-Semitism’, such as Holocaust denial, genocidal anti-Semitism and delegitimation of the rights of Jewish people under international law.

- *Islamoprejudice*

Hostility, prejudice and negative stereotyping towards people of Muslim faith, distinct from secular critiques of Islam (Imhoff and Recker, 2012).

This included: religious Islamoprejudice (such as the decontextualisation, misattribution or alteration of the Quran, Hadith, or Prophetic biography, presenting the *Takbir* as a war cry, reframing *Taqiya* as infiltration or using tropes associated with the Crusades); economic (such as equating *zakat* to funding terrorism); social (the description of Muslims, including the prophet Muhammad, and particularly Muslim men, as violent, misogynistic, unhygienic or paedophilic); racist (Muslim people racialised as either Arabic or Turkish); ideological (emphasising the subversive threat of Shariah law, the universalisation of all Muslims as either belonging to or supporting Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Boko Haram or Islamic State or the equivocation of Islam to Nazism, fascism or other historic threats (Jackson, 2011)); and/or cultural (such as homogenising or caricaturing all Muslim people as exhibiting Arabic or Arabian cultural norms and framing these norms as barbaric, emphasising violent images of stoning, beheadings and terrorist attacks (Jackson, 2011) or displaying religious intolerance, particularly to Judaism and Christianity).

- *Cultural prejudice*

Hostility, prejudice and negative stereotyping towards people of different cultural, linguistic, national, social or historic backgrounds (Baldwin, 2017), grounded in civic constructions of collective identity (Tempelman, 1999).

This includes: presenting foreign culture, religious practices and languages as undermining native communities, institutions, traditions and social cohesion, and distinguishing between ‘our’ and ‘your/their’ country; problematising economic migration, particularly from Asia or

Eastern Europe, as inherently economically threatening to workers; otherwise presenting migrants as lazy, such as by using terms like ‘scrounging’ and ‘parasitic’ or presenting them as abusing the welfare state and nationalised healthcare at the expense of taxpayers; associating foreign nationals with criminal activity, including organised crime, such as by referring to ‘Romanian gangs’ or by referring to refugees as rapists; delegitimising the issues facing and the rights of refugees and asylum seekers; emphasising the security threat of foreign groups, such as characterising foreign nationals and communities as a ‘fifth column’; opposing multiculturalism and ‘cultural Marxism’; and/or perpetuating negative stereotypes about other countries, including using terms such as ‘barbaric’ or ‘backwater’.

- *Racial prejudice*

Hostility, prejudice and negative stereotyping towards people of colour, grounded in ‘primordial’ constructions of collective identity (Tempelman, 1999).

This includes: delineating people based on (quasi-)biological or (quasi-)natural features that cannot be changed or questioned, such as between ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ groups and universalising considerations of groups based on these delineations; using racial stereotypes or epithets, such as universalising Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities as causing violence and crime; emphasising threats to ‘indigenous’ peoples through birth-rates, immigration or multiculturalism; problematising, patronising or appropriating Black culture or the culture of people of colour; minimising the negative effects of European colonisation (including by emphasising supposed ‘positives’, such as building railways in India) or the West’s role in the slave trade (such as by emphasising slavery in the Muslim world or Classical antiquity to minimise the Transatlantic slave trade); describing or associating people of colour as unhygienic or as vectors of disease; and/or denying or legitimising the existence of structural racism in Western cultures (such as minimising the racial motivations and institutional racism

in the murder of Stephen Lawrence and handling of the case by the police and Crown Prosecution Service).

## **Nationalism**

Unlike nativism, nationalism was measured as the positive articulation of what constituted the nation. Anthony D. Smith defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (2010: 9; see also Rooduijn, 2013).

### *- British nationalism*

The belief in a shared national identity for citizens of the UK.

This includes: the use of British cultural signifiers, such as the Union flag, pound sterling, monarchy, animal motifs such as the lion or bulldog, national cuisine, patron saints, national flowers, the national anthem and other songs or poetry associated with patriotism or nationalism, sports and the personification of Britain as ‘Britannia’; the celebration of British history (actual or perceived), geography and society as formative aspects of national identity, such as the Roman, Saxon and Norman conquests; the assertion of ‘Britishness’ as a trope, particularly in opposition to historic enemies such as the French, Dutch or Germans (Croft, 2012); and/or the assertion of the existence of a monolithic, primordial British culture.

### *- Christian nationalism*

National identity informed by religion, specifically drawing on “‘Old Testament’ parallels” between the nation and Israel, evangelical traditions and religious symbolism to uphold “cultural and blood purity” (Whitehead, Perry and Baker, 2018; see also Barkun, 1997).

This includes: the use of Christian language and/or motifs such as the crucifix or Holy Grail; emphasis on the Christian traditions of calendar festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Patron Saints Days; historical references such as Roman conversion to Christianity or the Crusades; and/or the use of the concepts of pan-Christian identity, nondenominational Christianity and Christian-centrism.

#### - *Militarism*

Internal (law and order) and external (imperialist warfare) solutions for conflict based on physical destruction, war and imperialism, as well as the patriarchal glorification of the soldier as the ideal human being (Fuchs, 2016c; 2018).

This includes: the use of militaristic language and symbolism, such as the use of military symbols, army surplus, organisational forms, medals and ceremonies; lionisation of soldiers, regardless of context, such as ‘Marine A’ (who was convicted for murder, later reduced to manslaughter); the justification for British military intervention, past and present; and/or the advocacy of military force or militaristic values to solve social or political issues, such as calling for national service or for army intervention in policing.

#### - *Monarchism*

Advocacy of monarchy as a continued British institution, constitutional arrangement, cultural fact and symbol of essentialised national values (see Miller, 1995).

This includes: support for the personal cult of monarchy, such as the celebration and idealisation of individuals such as the Queen, Princes Harry and William, and Diana, Princess of Wales.

#### - *Nostalgic nationalism*

National identity grounded in an idealised representation of the past, often expressed in terms of commemoration or restoration (see Hayton, 2016).

This includes: imagery, symbolism and reverence associated with seminal periods or events in British history, such as Roman Britain (Boudicca's rebellion, etc), the defeat of the Spanish Armada, British participation in the Napoleonic Wars (Waterloo, Trafalgar, etc), British Empire (Lloyd, 2016), and/or the wartime, interwar and post-war periods.

#### - *Unionism*

Support for the continued political unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (sometimes colloquially referred to as Ulster, despite three counties of historic Ulster being in Ireland).

This includes: reification of British or UK-wide institutions, culture and identity; delegitimisation of political Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism and/or independence, depending on the context; and/or the lionisation of historic unionist groups, such as the Orange Order (Boyce and O'Day, 2001).

### **Anti-establishmentarianism**

Anti-establishmentarianism was defined as opposition to the ruling political class, mainstream political parties, economic elites and mainstream media (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016).

#### - *Political anti-establishmentarianism*

Hostility to or delegitimisation of political elites, such as politicians, parties, institutions and public sector workers.

This includes: hostility to mainstream politicians and public sector workers at all levels, particularly through satire, caricature or misrepresentation, or by describing them as traitorous; opposition to institutions such as the British Parliament or electoral system; opposition to all other political parties for reasons beyond ideological grounds, such as characterising them as corrupt or identical; and/or conspiracy theorising about state cover-ups or intervention.

- *Media scepticism*

Hostility to or delegitimisation of mainstream media, such as traditional mass media outlets, journalists and owners.

This includes: the accusation of media corruption, bias and spreading fake news; advocating the suppression of the freedom of press; and/or conspiracy theorising, such as about the suppression of factual evidence.

**Social conservatism**

Social conservatism was defined as the need to uphold traditional social, moral and cultural values and opposition to social change.

- *Upholding traditional values*

Defending ideas or beliefs around social, moral or cultural issues grounded in perceived historical norms.

This includes: emphasising the importance of the nuclear family; the emphasising the role of the church as integral to public life and the opposition to secularism; and/or the opposition to female reproductive rights and advocacy of ‘pro-life’ rhetoric.



- *Gender and sexual normativity*

Defending ideas or beliefs around gender and/or sexuality grounded in perceived historical norms.

This includes: advocating (the concept of) traditional gender roles, cis-genderism and trans-exclusionism, such as distinguishing between male and female roles or using tropes associated with typical gender constructions; anti-feminism; heteronormativity and homonormativity, such as normative conceptualisations of how LGBT+ are supposed to be; and/or other sexual normativity.

**Anti-globalisation (and anti-globalism)**

Anti-globalisation was defined as opposition to global political influence and economic integration exercised through multinational corporations or supranational organisations (often referred to generically as ‘globalists’).

- *Euroscepticism*

Opposition to the European Union and European integration.

This includes: characterising the EU as inherently left-wing, socialist or communist or equating it to the Soviet Union (such as referring to it as the USSR); describing it as pursuing a globalist or globalising agenda, particularly at the expense of local or national identity, culture, politics and economy; perpetuating ‘EU as anti-democratic or undemocratic’ narratives, such as exaggerating the proportion of laws made in Brussels or the role of the European Commission; and/or hostile attitudes about migration based on European freedom of movement.

- *Anti-multinationalism*

Opposition to multinational corporations and the support for and protection of “local productive, autochthonous (often familial) enterprise” (Zaslove, 2004: 76).

This includes: criticism about the role of multinational corporations, owners, goods and services in the economy, politics and society.

#### - *Anti-UN*

Opposition to the United Nations.

This includes: characterising the UN as inherently left-wing, socialist or communist or equating it to the Soviet Union; describing it as pursuing a globalist or globalising agenda, particularly at the expense of local or national culture, politics and economy; and/or political or diplomatic failures (perceived or otherwise), such as its inability to prevent war or conversely pursue an interventionist agenda.

### **Climate change denial**

Climate change denial was also measured as a separate category from anti-globalist, anti-establishment and social conservative ideologies (despite often also displaying or being grounded in either or both) to capture the full extent of radical right climate denial (which largely encompasses all three aspects), though all are fundamentally grounded in the rejection of mainstream diagnoses, (anthropogenic) causes and responses (Gemenis, Katsanidou and Vasilopoulou, 2012; see also Forchtner, Kroneder and Wetzel, 2018).

This includes: trying to downplay the role of human society in climate change; uncoupling the link between pollution and broader ecological damage; framing environmental protection as encouraging or facilitating immigration, multiculturalism, globalism, socialism or economic harm, such as equating immigration with building on green belt land or using more resources

or sustainable fishing with ‘uneconomic’ fishing quotas; and/or framing renewable energy sources as inefficient, expensive or unaesthetic, such as the ‘effect’ of windfarms on the British countryside.

### **Laissez-faire economics**

Laissez-faire economics was defined as the advocacy of an economy free from government intervention.

This includes: posts arguing against regulation, tariffs, subsidies or other forms of government regulation.

### **Apocalyptic eschatology**

As Chris Allen notes, “within Britain First’s hierarchy something of a doomsday prophecy exists, where the end of civilisation follows an apocalyptic battle between Christians and Muslims” (2014a: 357; 2014b). This category aimed to specifically measure the instances that this apocalyptic end-game narrative occurred.

This includes: reference to the apocalypse or Revelation, including quoting Biblical verse about “end times”, quoting or symbolising the Second Coming of Christ or referring to salvation; allusion to a generic apocalypse, end of civilisation and rebirth; and/or reference to an upcoming war between Christians and Muslims, believers and nonbelievers or other in- and out-groups.

### **Group communication**

Group communication was coded as any post that directly provided any information about the party or its activities.

This includes: updates about upcoming, ongoing or completed campaigns, the number of members, votes or social media followers, or party events; useful information, such as contact info; and/or news regarding the status or activities of individual party figures, such as legal issues.

## **Finance**

Finance was coded as any method of generating financial support for the party.

### *- Shop*

This includes: any mention of the group's shop in a post, such as links to online stores and order forms, stock promotions or images from the catalogue.

### *- Fundraising*

This includes: any mention of single or recurring donations or subscriptions in a post, including calls for donations for legal support, bequests or campaign donations.

## **Mobilisation**

Mobilisation was coded as any method of generating action amongst party supporters.

### *- Campaigning*

Any issue-based activism.

This includes: petitions, email campaigns, distributing flyers and leaflets, boycotts, protests and pickets for issues such as boycotting major media publications, protesting against the construction of mosques or petitioning to release ‘Marine A’.

- *Recruitment*

Attracting new subscribed members or full-time activists.

This includes: any post advertising party membership or activist roles.

- *Elections*

Any campaigning for democratically-elected representatives at local, regional, national or European levels of government.

This includes: promoting nominated candidates or participation in primaries; encouraging voter registration; distributing manifestos and election materials; and/or running negative campaigns against opposing candidates or parties.

- *Vigilantism*

Inciting in or undertaking of direct action for the purpose of self-perceived justice.

This includes: any posts promoting or publicising vigilante campaigns, including ‘Christian patrols’, confronting ‘hate preachers’ and invading mosques.